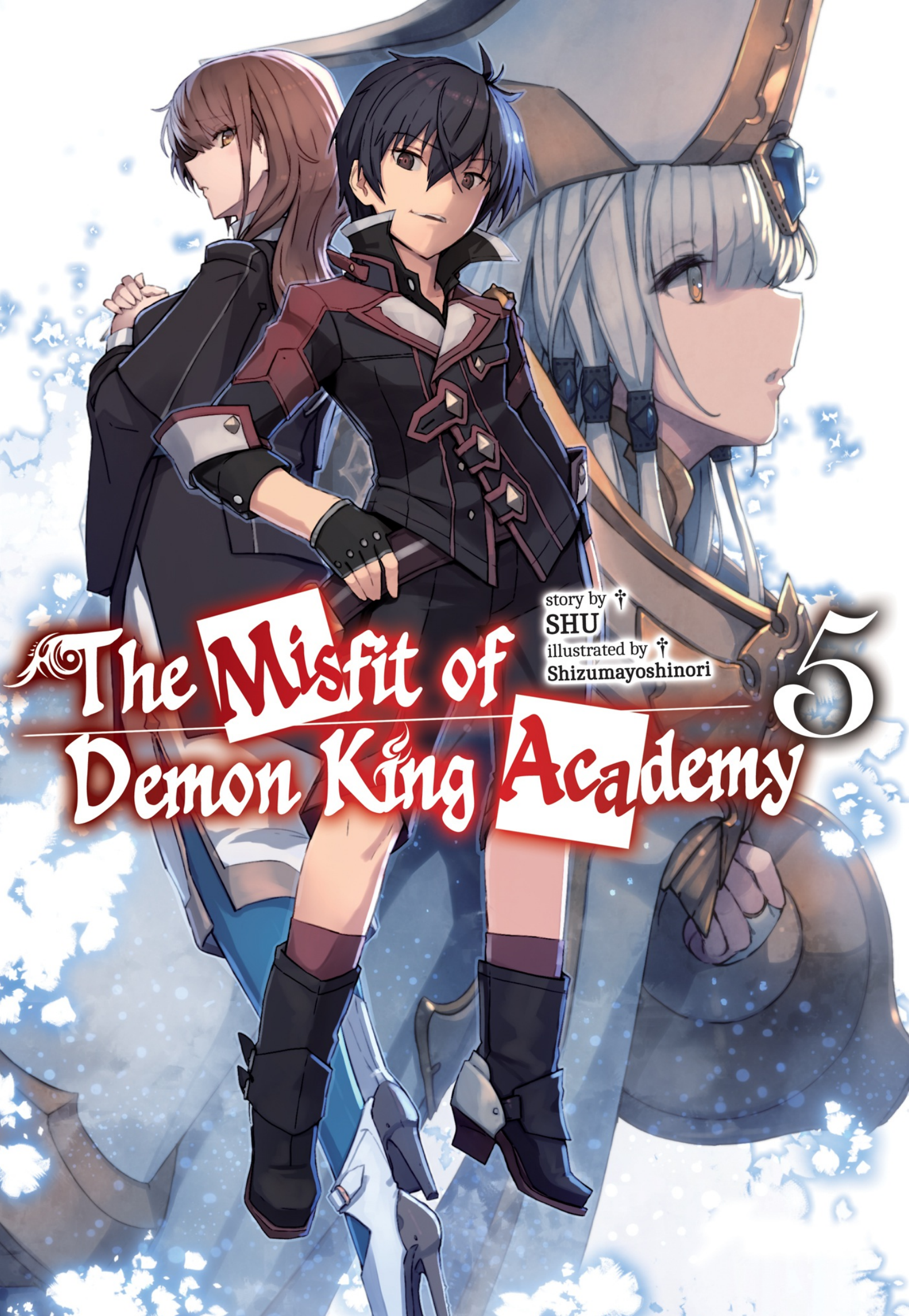




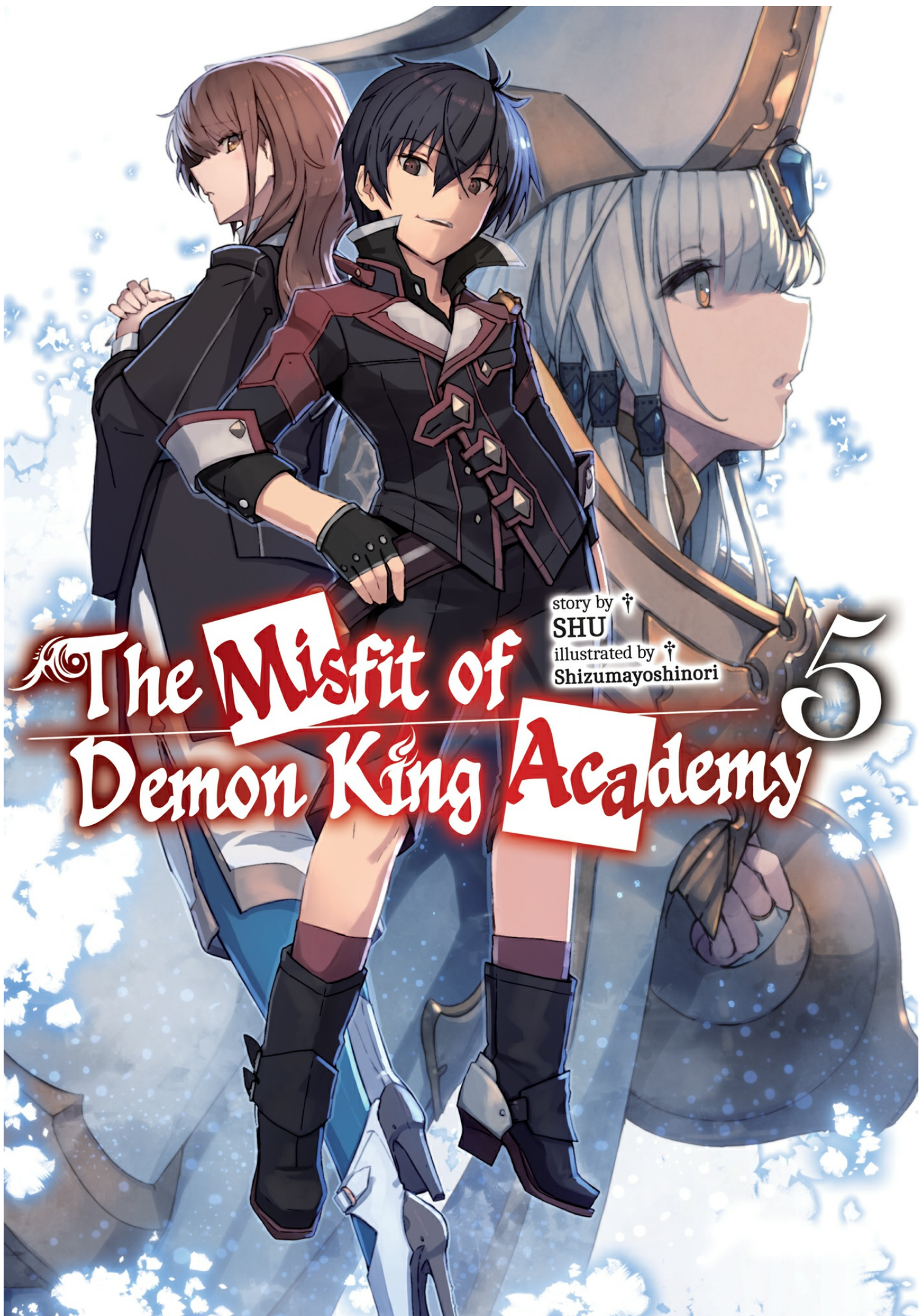
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The Misfit of Demon King Academy

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THE MISFIT OF DEMON
KING ACADEMY

Keywords

Gods

Extremely powerful beings that govern the laws of nature. Each god possesses a particular "order" that can be exercised.

Selection Trial

A ceremony to select an agent to govern the lost orders of gods that have been destroyed. Candidates selected by gods contest with each other, and the victor becomes a proxy of the gods.

Dragons

Ancient creatures rumored to have been on the verge of extinction two thousand years ago. They are capable of digesting the sources of those they consume.

Underground World

An enormous cavern located deep beneath Azesion and Dilhade. Not even Anos knew of its existence. The world consists of multiple kingdoms inhabited by people called "draconids."

Draconids

Inhabitants of the underground world. They resemble humans and demons though they are not exactly the same. As the name of their race implies, they are believed to be the descendents of dragons.

Dragonborn

The first generation of draconids born from dragons themselves. A dragonborn's true identity is the combination of all the sources the dragon consumed, born as a new life.

Designed by Suzuki Toru

§ Prologue: The Moon of Creation

The Mythical Age.

Snowflakes fluttered towards the ground, glittering as they reflected warm rays of light... Actually, no. The snowflakes were, in fact, a form of light themselves. Altiertonoa, the Moon of Creation, hung full in the sky alongside the regular moon. Its silvery light shone down on the world below, creating the illusion of falling snow. The “snowflakes” were shaped like flowers, which had earned them the name of lunar snowdrops.

Under the light of the Moon of Creation, all life gained magic at the core of its being. This created the origin and foundation of all life—the source.

Illuminated by that silver moonlight was a battlefield where many had lost their lives. The dead bodies, broken trees, and wilted plants on that wasteland froze like time had stopped then ceased to exist. Once the old was gone, the new could be born. It was said that after thousands of nights of destruction, the Moon of Creation would shine in the sky and create new life. Through Altiertonoa’s miracle, the order of the world was maintained by cycling the lives that had been lost.

Silver lunar snowdrops fell like snow upon the piles of corpses, but within that frozen scenery, one figure was still moving. It was a demon man. He stood alone at the center of the destruction—that was more like overwhelming devastation—dressed in black from head to toe. He was the infamous Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad.

The Demon King slowly stepped forward, glaring up at the heavens with Magic Eyes dyed mauve. A plank-shaped foothold made of darkness appeared in midair. Another black plank appeared one step above it, followed by another. The darkness spread to form a staircase that stretched all the way up to the shining Moon of Creation in the sky. The Demon King began to climb that staircase.

Just how much time did he spend climbing those stairs? Altiertonoa was so

high up, even when the mountains below looked like pebbles, there was still no end in sight. It seemed as if seven days had long passed, yet the night never turned to day. As long as the Moon of Creation shone in the sky, morning would never arrive.

Another seven days passed, but the silver moon was still far in the distance. As the Demon King continued climbing, lunar snowdrops fell upon the stairs he'd created. The flowers suddenly glowed brightly, and a silver-haired girl appeared ten steps above the Demon King. Her hair reached all the way to her ankles; her eyes were a bright silver; and she was dressed in a pure-white gown.

"Go back," she said.

"I refuse."

The Demon King resumed climbing the staircase, but no matter how many steps he climbed, the distance between him and the girl remained unchanged.

"What is your purpose here?"

"To bring down the moon."

An emotionless gaze pierced the Demon King. "You won't succeed."

"Nothing is impossible for me," he replied.

The girl disappeared.

Unfazed, the Demon King continued climbing. Another seven days passed before the glowing lunar snowdrops fell once again, signaling the silver-haired girl's arrival.

"Why do you wish to bring down the Moon of Creation?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask?"

The girl stared wordlessly at the Demon King.

"When morning comes, the Sun of Destruction takes lives," the Demon King explained. "When night falls, the Moon of Creation creates new life. We're sick of being your toys."

"That is the law of this world."

"Which is why I shall destroy it."

The girl's eyes widened.

"If something so absurd is the law of this world, we're better off without it."

"If the law is destroyed, order will crumble. This world will perish," the girl said.

The Demon King glared at her menacingly. "Is this world a kind place?"

She didn't reply to his question—perhaps because she was unable to.

"Is this a world worth defending? Only death and destruction exists. All hope has long been lost. This world is nothing more than a giant torture chamber. As long as its laws exist, no light will ever reach us. Only the echoes of screams and cries can be heard." The Demon King stopped and looked up at the girl. "Carve this into your skull, unknown god: I am not one to simply obey due to an overused threat like the end of the world."

The girl finally broke her silence. "Militia." When the Demon King looked at her questioningly, she continued. "I am Militia, the Goddess of Creation, the order that created this world. And you?"

"Demon King Anos Voldigard," he replied.

"Anos." Her voice was flat and detached, but for some reason, the sound lingered in one's ears. "The world isn't kind."

She disappeared again, leaving behind a lunar snowdrop.

The Demon King remained where he was, staring at the flower. For some reason, he didn't make any attempt to walk again. He glared at the Moon of Creation in the distance, seemingly lost in thought as he gazed into its abyss.

One hour passed, then four, then ten. A whole day passed. The Demon King remained as still as ever, standing there until another glowing flower fell before him. The silver-haired girl appeared on the staircase once more. The Goddess of Creation's emotionless eyes stared into the abyss of the Demon King.

"Hmm. You were much faster that time."

"Because you were waiting." Militia lifted her hand and pointed at the Demon King.

“You could tell?”

“I could.”

“I see. You aren’t the Goddess of Creation for nothing.”

The Demon King turned around and sat down on the black staircase. Without any of the hostility he showed towards the Moon of Creation, he gazed down at the world below. There was a hint of grief in his expression.

Curious, Militia descended the stairs. The distance between the two of them shortened. With his back still facing Militia, the Demon King turned to look over his shoulder.

“There’s something I want to ask you,” he said.

“About the world?”

“About you.”

Militia’s eyes widened slightly.

“Now that I think about it, I realize I’ve never tried to understand the gods. Tell me what you’re feeling, Militia.”

In a voice devoid of emotion, she answered. “Gods are order. We do not feel anger, kindness, sadness, or pride. We are merely born as order and fulfill our roles. We are immortal, thus we are not living.”

“So you have no feelings.”

“Immortal beings do not need feelings,” she said matter-of-factly. “They are a function bestowed only on the living.”

The Demon King’s gaze returned to the ground, and he thought for a moment. “Gods aren’t immortal,” he eventually said. “No beings are immortal before me.” The Demon King asked the Goddess of Creation another question. “Will you tell me about yourself?”

“What do you wish to know?” Militia replied, as unaffected as ever.

“Anything about you.”

The god that looked like a young girl closed her mouth. A long, long silence passed. Eventually, she replied, “I have a little sister.”

“Oh? Do you get along?”

“I’ve never met her.”

“Why is that?”

“Because that is the order of things,” she said. At the same time, the sky to the east turned a faint red. The long night was about to end. “The Moon of Creation is to disappear. My time here is over.”

“Can I ask one more question before you go?” the Demon King asked.

Militia nodded.

“What’s your sister’s name?”

The silver moon in the night sky faded as the sun rose in its place. Militia transformed into a glittering lunar snowdrop and disappeared, but not before leaving behind her sister’s name.

Time passed. Life on the earth continued to perish. Millions of lives were lost. Seven years from that night, the Moon of Creation rose in the sky once again. In the silent world where time seemed to have stopped, a black staircase stretched up to the silver moon. And someone was climbing it. It was the Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad.

He walked for seven days and seven nights, until the mountains below looked to be the size of pebbles and a lunar snowdrop softly fell upon the staircase. Its brilliant silver light intensified, and the flower took the shape of a person. Militia, the Goddess of Creation, appeared, her appearance the exact same as before.

“Hmm. Long time no see, Militia.”

“It’s been seven years.” Militia descended the staircase.

The Demon King reached into his breast pocket and took out a letter. “I have a gift for you today.” He handed it to her. “It’s from your sister.”

Militia opened the envelope and removed the letter from within. A magic circle was drawn on the paper. When she pressed her hand against it, words played in her head. She listened to them for a moment, then smiled softly.

“What did it say?”

She looked back at the Demon King. “You didn’t read it?”

“I wouldn’t read a letter addressed to you.”

Militia replied. “Give my regards to my Demon King, she said.”

“Hmm. I did go through quite the trouble to get her to write that.”

The Demon King sat down on the staircase while Militia remained standing beside him.

“I had a dream,” she said.

“Oh? So the gods can dream too.”

Militia shook her head. “It was my first time.”

“What kind of dream was it?”

“One of a god reincarnated,” she said as though her thoughts were on the ground far below.

“What happened?”

“Even if a god reincarnates, order is order; a god is a god,” she replied plainly. “But in my dream, a god became a life other than order. I left everything of mine to my sister.”

“What did you do after you left everything with her?”

She stared at the Demon King as she answered. “I don’t know.”

The Demon King thought for a moment, then changed his question. “What did you want to do, then?”

“I wanted to become the kindness of a cold world.”

The words had spilled from the Goddess of Creation’s lips so casually, the Demon King smiled.

“Is that funny?” she asked.

“No. I just realized my own foolishness,” he said with a smirk. “It seems there are many kinds of gods out there.”

“There are many types of order, not life.”

The Demon King chuckled. “Do you have time tonight?”

“A little.”

“Then to continue from where we left off seven years ago, let us talk the night away.”

On a night when the moon shone silver and lunar snowdrops fluttered down from above, the Goddess of Creation and Demon King of Tyranny falteringly conversed upon a dark staircase reaching into the sky.

§ 1. A Plea to the Demon King

The morning sun pierced my eyelids, rousing me from my sleep.

I'd had a dream. A dream of two thousand years ago, in which I'd met Militia's little sister and delivered her letter to Militia. However, I couldn't recall her name or what we'd said to each other. I dug through the depths of my memories, but a dazzling light blinded my eyes.

The same happened when I tried to recall Abernyu. In order to seize the order of destruction, I had defeated her and brought her to the ground. The Goddess of Destruction had become the Demon Castle Delsgade, and the Sun of Destruction had become the Abolisher of Reason. But had that truly been the only reason? Hadn't there been another goal to bringing down the sun? Why hadn't I destroyed the Goddess of Destruction? It shouldn't have been impossible for me.

I knew that the Goddess of Destruction's power—Venuzdonoa, the Abolisher of Reason—was effective against gods. Had I kept her alive as an extra countermeasure against them? Or was she like the Heavenly Father in that the complete destruction of her order would risk the destruction of the world?

If I couldn't remember both Militia's sister and the Goddess of Destruction, it was possible that they were the same person. The younger sister of the Goddess of Creation could be Abernyu, the Goddess of Destruction. The Goddess of Creation's power was the Moon of Creation, while her sister's was the Sun of Destruction. When the moon rose, the sun fell, and vice versa.

If this was true, it would explain why Militia couldn't meet her sister. But there was no proof. At present, there was only one way to confirm the truth: to restore the Demon Castle Delsgade to its original form as the Goddess of Destruction to ask her directly.

Of course, if that were a realistic option, I would have done so already. Manifesting Abernyu into this world would mean the complete restoration of the order of destruction. The world itself would be one step closer to

destruction. All living beings would be more susceptible to death, and the lives that had been extended through the Goddess of Destruction's absence would be lost.

If I could talk to her without releasing her power, there wouldn't be a problem, but things don't always work out that well, and there was no guarantee that my memory loss wasn't the work of another god. In other words, it was possible my memories had been stolen to tempt me into restoring Abernyu. I had no recollection of being caught by a god, but the chance was there. I might have forgotten even that. But now that I'd noticed one thing missing, I was beginning to identify more and more of my incomplete memories.

Perhaps it had happened back then—when I'd destroyed the jinx the Sun of Destruction had cast on my memories. That was when I'd come to realize my reincarnation had been incomplete.

Was the Goddess of Destruction on my side? Or was she just appearing to be? At any rate, I was certain that someone had indeed interfered with my reincarnation. Their efforts had been half successful, and I had reincarnated in an incomplete state. Or had this situation been intentionally planned by someone?

"Hmm. Well, it doesn't matter."

This was no different to that time with Avos Dilhevia. If there was someone else plotting things, they would eventually reveal themselves. While I waited, I could take my time thinking about how to restore my memories.

I sat up and drew a magic circle, changing clothes from my sleepwear to my school uniform. Then I left my room and went downstairs, where I could hear mom's energetic voice coming from the other room. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted from the kitchen.

"...and you'll never guess what happened next! My little Anos became the Demon King! I thought he'd go somewhere far away, but I couldn't get in his way, so I decided I'd see him off with a smile, right? I asked him to spare a thought for his mother from time to time, you know? And do you know what he said next? Go on, what do you think he said?"

I entered the kitchen to find mom and Misha preparing breakfast together. Misha was wearing an apron over the white uniform of the Demon King Academy. They were all but done with cooking, so Misha was serving bread, salad, scrambled eggs, and bacon on a plate.

She looked over at mom and answered in her usual flat tone, “I’d like to have mushroom gratin for dinner tonight, mom.”

“That’s right! That’s exactly what he said!” mom cried, lowering her clenched fist. “Anos came back to us! He’s grown into such a fine man, but he’s still a mommy’s boy. I mean, that only makes sense, right? My little Anos may be the Demon King, but he’s still only six months old. He still needs his mother, right?”

The reason Misha knew what I’d said was because mom had told this story multiple times already. Anyone else would have grown fed up with hearing it by now, but Misha always answered her dutifully.

“Anos is kind.”

“That’s right! He truly is! He’s so kind. I worry about him getting tricked by someone bad someday.”

Misha tilted her head questioningly, but Mom kept on speaking anyway.

“I knew you’d understand me, Misha. Anos is kindhearted but has lots of strength. He’s the Demon King, after all! Wasn’t his speech at the Demon King Reordination Ceremony just the greatest?”

“Yeah.” Misha turned around, her long platinum-blond hair swaying behind her. I caught a glimpse of a faint smile on her face.

“You know, I was actually really nervous during the ceremony,” mom was saying.

“Why?”

“I was worried! Could Anos really speak in front of so many people? What if he forgot what he wanted to say? But in the end, he was amazing! He said everything without making any mistakes!”

Misha blinked, her expression blank as always.

Mom seemed to think of the Demon King Reordination Ceremony as some

kind of children's recital. There really was no winning against her. It was as though she was warning me not to think of such a trivial event as an achievement. The ceremony had offered the first public words of the Demon King of Tyranny after two thousand years of absence. The people of Dilhade had no choice but to obey me. But, indeed, all I had done was speak without stuttering. Dilhade's future, the future of peace, was still yet to be achieved. Mom's eye-opening view was a reminder for me to work hard without becoming arrogant. I had to keep that in my mind.

"Good morning," Misha said.

Mom whirled around. "Oh! Good morning, Anos. You're just in time for breakfast. Could you wait in the living room for a bit?"

"Where's dad?"

"He's already eaten and is back at work in the workshop. We've received loads of requests from people asking for your father to make ceremonial swords. Business is booming thanks to you, Anos dear!"

The swords dad made were swords forged by the Demon King's father. I'd only just reincarnated, so people probably wanted them as a token of good luck.

Misha came over carrying the large plate she'd finished arranging breakfast on.

"Ready to go?" she asked.

"Yeah."

The two of us moved to the living room.

Just then, a sound came from the entrance of the shop. Someone was knocking on the door. Misha must have heard it too, because she tilted her head.

"It's rare to have a visitor so early." I made my way to the shop front, unlocked the door, and opened it.

"Ah..."

Standing outside was a girl with brown hair and brown eyes—Emilia.

“Hmm. A rare visitor indeed. What do you want?”

Her head was lowered, her gaze fixed on the ground as she bit her lip. “Um, are you busy right now?”

“We were just about to have breakfast.”

“I see.”

“Oh? Is that Emilia?” mom asked, appearing over my shoulder.

Emilia bowed. “Hello.”

Mom clapped her hands together happily. “Perfect timing! Would you like to eat with us? Misha was here practicing today, so we made loads extra.”

“No thank you. I’m in a hurry today. If you’d excuse me.” Emilia swiftly turned on her heel.

“Emilia,” I called, making her stop. “You came to see me, no? I’ll hear you out.”

“But...what about your breakfast?”

“You swallowed your pride to come and see me. I’m sure whatever it is you’ve come to say is more important than breakfast.” I turned to Misha. “Sorry, Misha.”

She shook her head. “Go.”

“See you later, Anos. Good luck with work!” mom called, waving me off with a smile.

Outside the store, I turned to Emilia. “Did you want to talk at the castle?”

“No. Just while walking is fine...”

“Then let’s go with that.”

We slowly made our way down the road leading to Delsgade. Emilia followed at a slight distance behind me, dragging her feet gloomily. She remained silent for a while, and I slowed my pace without pressing her. Eventually, she made up her mind and spoke up.

“I wish...for an audience with the Demon King.”

Her voice was a mix of humiliation and shame. Even now that the truth was out, she must still have been struggling to accept me as the real Demon King, but she had to at least understand. If not, she wouldn't have requested an audience with me. But her emotions had yet to catch up. Up until today, the pride of being royalty had been everything to her.

"Granted."

Seeking an audience with me right now was the equivalent of asking for salvation. I had a pretty good idea what Emilia's wish was.

"There's no place for me here. Not one at all..."

"Perhaps so."

"You said you'd save your people from their tragedies. If so, then you should save me."

I came to a stop. Emilia paused too.

"I beg of you," she mumbled.

It must have been quite humiliating to beg for charity from one's mortal enemy. The vexation was clear on her face. But Emilia had reached her limit with her current self.

"If you are the true Demon King of Tyranny, that is."

"Emilia." I turned and looked her straight in the eye. "Do you truly wish to be saved?"

"Of course I do."

"Will you swallow all your complaints in order to be saved?"

After thinking for a moment, she nodded. "Yes."

"I will not allow your tragedy, but remember this: the only one who can save you is you, for the only one blaming you is you."

Emilia stared back at me confusedly.

"Do you enjoy teaching?"

"I don't dislike it. It's just the only job I stuck with," she said ashamedly.

“Then I’ll arrange for you to return to work. However, your destination will be the Hero Academy Arclanisca.”

“In Gairadite? You want me to teach humans?!”

“It won’t be a problem for you. Besides, no one in Gairadite will care about whether you’re royalty or not.”

“But that place will discriminate against demons no matter what!”

“Exactly. All demons are the same to them. Whether the Demon King or a hybrid off the street, we’re all equal.”

She gaped wordlessly for a moment. “How will that help? Doing that won’t—”

“You said you wouldn’t complain.”

Emilia fell silent.

“If you continue teaching for a year or if you make a notable achievement, I will promote you back to the Demon King Academy and grant you a position equal to those of the Seven Demon Elders.”

“Are you serious?”

“I don’t lie.”

“What would be considered a notable achievement?”

“The details will be sent to you later, but as for now, the people of Azesion have lost all trust in the Hero Academy. The students have become rather unruly. You just need to get them back on their feet.”

Emilia thought for a moment, then said, “Very well. Please keep your word.”

She just had to hold out for a year or so until things got better. After that, she would reobtain her past position and honor, and return to her former self. That was probably what she was thinking, anyway, but such naivety was wishful thinking. She was about to learn firsthand what it meant to seek salvation from the Demon King of Tyranny.

“Emilia, you came to me for salvation. With that in mind, I will not allow you to abandon your salvation and flee.” I warned her with a threatening look. “Do not forget this. No matter how harsh and cruel the trial that awaits you, you will

definitely be saved.”

§ 2. The Sleepy Witch

After parting with Emilia, I sent a Leaks message to Melheis regarding her situation. He would immediately arrange for her transfer to the Hero Academy. However, I had more time to spare than anticipated. I had expected her to put up more of a fight, but it seemed she'd become a lot more docile than before. That must have been down to how harsh her days had been until now.

"Anos."

I turned around to see Misha standing with a basket in her hands.

"Breakfast," she said, offering the basket to me. "I packed it for you."

"I appreciate it. Sorry for the trouble."

Misha smiled and shook her head. "Are you going to Delsgade?" she asked.

"I'll be going later, but it's still a little early." I stored the basket away in a magic circle and thought for a moment. "Hmm. I have an idea. Let's go to your house."

Misha blinked a few times then tilted her head.

"We talked about it once before, remember? I'm going to go and wake Sasha."

If I recalled correctly, we'd talked about it shortly before the educational exchange with the Hero Academy. I'd made a promise to wake up Sasha, who was terrible at getting out of bed in the morning.

"I've put it off until now, but this is the perfect time to go."

Misha nodded and held her hand out to me. "She'll be delighted."

When I took her petite hand, she cast Gatom. Our vision turned pure white and then faded to reveal a different scene.

We were in a spacious room with a high ceiling and multiple ornate pillars. A red curtain was fluttering around the open window, from which sunlight was

streaming in. The bright rays fanned out over the canopy bed, yet the person lying in the bed showed no signs of rousing. Dressed in a pink negligee and with her hair untied, Sasha was snoring away peacefully.

“She’s out like a log.”

“It’s her second sleep.” Misha pointed at the window.

“Hmm. So she opened the window then went back to sleep anyway.”

Misha nodded. “Maybe it’s her third.”

I approached Sasha and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Sasha,” I called, but she didn’t respond. If she was like this every day, that she could make it to school on time at all was impressive. I put my hand on her head and nudged her lightly. *“Wake up already. Or should I shake the whole house instead?”*

I’d added a bit of magic into my words, which made Sasha crack her eyes open.

“Misha? Is it morning already?” she mumbled. She must have still been half asleep to be mistaking me for Misha.

“Have you forgotten your master’s face?”

Sasha’s blurry eyes stared up at me. “My master? Anos? My Demon King...”

“That’s right. It’s your Demon King. I came to wake you up.”

“What? That’s weird. Anos couldn’t be here...”

Her speech was still slurred with sleepiness.

“We spoke about it before. Now I’ve gone out of my way to come here. It’s about time you woke up.”

“Oh, so it’s a dream...”

She wasn’t listening.

“It isn’t a dream. Wake up.”

“Anos is cold even in my dreams.” Sasha grabbed her sheets and rolled over, turning her back to me.

“Sasha.”

“I’m still sleepy.”

I extended my hand, but she grabbed it and tried to drag me into the bed.

“Nngh... Then how about this? You can sleep with me. My bed’s big enough for both of us...”

“I believe I’ve said this before, but don’t think you can sleep before me.”

“Hmph,” she grumbled, like a spoiled child throwing a tantrum. “Anos would never do that, even in a dream...”

Her grumbling was incomprehensible. It was like she had no intention of waking up.

“Stop whining so much.”

“If you want me to listen to you, you should keep your word...”

Sasha rolled back towards me. The sheets shifted to reveal her thin negligee.

“What word am I keeping?”

“You said you wouldn’t let me sleep,” she said, pouting. “If it’s a dream, you could at least hold me a little.”

“Hmm. I guess there’s no helping it.”

I reached for Sasha and touched her.

“Ah! Hee hee... You can come closer, closer...” she said, giggling happily.

“Sure.” I proceeded to pick Sasha up.

“Eeeeek!”

With Sasha in my arms, I got up from the bed. “Well? I’m holding you now. Good grief, to think you can’t even get out of bed alone. A child could do better.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Misha shaking her head faintly. Had I done something wrong? Apparently not. The next moment, Misha gasped and started nodding furiously instead. It seemed I’d done the right thing after all.

“Huh? Anos?” Sasha blinked in my arms and stared up at me. Her sleepy gaze gradually grew steadier until she was finally able to speak again. “What

happened just now? Huh? Wasn't that a dream? Why would Anos be here?"



“I promised you, didn’t I? I’m here to wake you up.”

“Oh. I see. Th-Thanks...” she said in spite of all the questions she still seemed to want to ask. “By the way, Anos, can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Did I, um, say anything weird?”

When I looked at her questioningly, she attempted to explain herself.

“I...I thought I was dreaming. Yeah, I mean, I was having a weird dream, so I might have said something weird. Did I?”

“You said a lot of incomprehensible things, and whined about not getting up until I held you. Thus, here I am holding you.”

Sasha sighed in relief, then tilted her head. “Why would you pick me up when I asked you to hold me? I’m not a child.”

The moment after she’d said that, Sasha’s mouth fell open. She looked panicked—as though she’d just dug her own grave.

“I didn’t think it was all sleep talk,” I said. “I assumed you wanted me to wake you up, but it turns out that was all because of your dream.”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right. A dream. It was all because I was dreaming! Not that it matters, of course. That aside—”

“What were you dreaming of?” I asked.

Sasha gaped. “O-Oh, well, you know...”

“It had to be a rather good dream, judging from that blissful look on your face.”

She turned away, blushing. “Y-Yeah. It was a good dream.”

“You called my name too. Was I in your dream?”

She clutched my sleeve. “You were...”

“I see. So even the former walking nightmare can now appear in good dreams. And then? What was I doing in your dream?”

“Wh-What?!” Sasha yelped.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing...”

I stared at her forlorn expression.

“Hmm. It seems I’ve pried too far. Some things aren’t meant to be shared. I won’t ask any further.”

“Ah...”

I tried to let Sasha down, but she kept hold of my sleeve to stop me.

“You were...” she muttered quietly.

“Hmm?”

“You were carrying me. Just like this.”

I laughed heartily and ruffled her loose blonde hair. “There was no need to hide that so stubbornly, was there? How childish.”

“Sh-Shut up. Who cares about that?” Sasha clung to me tightly, making her sister giggle. “Jeez, what are you laughing at, Misha?”

“I’m just glad to see you happy.”

Sasha looked a little guilty at that.

I chuckled heartily. “Bwa ha ha. I can never tell who’s older between the two of you.”

“Sasha’s the older one.”

“You should try to act more like the younger one, Misha,” Sasha grumbled sullenly.

Misha tilted her head. “How so?”

“However you can. Maybe by being more lazy than I am.”

Misha froze, unsure how to respond, but she eventually seemed to realize something and opened her mouth. “Being born second makes me lazy already.”

“Smart-ass!”

What a sharp rebuttal.

“Ugh, whatever.”

Sasha started kicking her legs in the air, so I put her down. A magic circle appeared beneath her feet and moved upwards, turning her negligee into the black Demon King Academy uniform. She was dressed in the blink of an eye.

“What should I do?” Misha asked, looking up at me. She seemed to be bothered by being told she didn’t act like a little sister.

“I don’t think it’s something to worry about.”

“But I’m still worried...”

“Then how about you try asking for something every now and then?”

“Asking for something?”

“A little selfishness might make you seem more like the younger one.”

Misha thought for a moment, then turned to Sasha. “I’m sad.”

“Wh-What’s up with you all of a sudden?” Alarmed, Sasha stepped closer to Misha.

“I’m sad that Anos won’t go to class anymore.”

It was then that Sasha caught on to what she was saying. “Oh, that’s right. But now the truth is out, there’d be a huge commotion if the Demon King of Tyranny attended class.”

“Yeah...”

“I’m a little sad about it too, but it can’t be helped,” Sasha said, linking hands with Misha gently.

“I’m sad for Anos as well.”

“For Anos?” Sasha looked at me curiously. “But he’s already proved he’s the Demon King of Tyranny, so there’s no need for him to attend anymore, right?”

“There was never much reason for me to attend in the first place. But those dull classes weren’t the worst thing in the world, especially with you guys there.”

“Really?” Sasha smiled. “But that means... Becoming the Demon King of

Tyranny wasn't all good, huh?"

Misha nodded in agreement.

"Oh, there's no need to feel down about that. There was a lot to prepare, but now everything's ready for today."

"Huh? Wait... Hold on. What are you talking about?"

The two sisters looked at me.

"I'm talking about my return to school, of course."

"WHAT?!" Sasha yelled in disbelief.

§ 3. An Unusual Transfer Student

Demon King Academy Delsgade.

Alongside the bell signaling the start of class, manic cackling rang out from the corridor. The door to the second lecture hall slammed open with a mighty bang, revealing Eldmed, the Conflagration King, dressed in his trench coat and top hat. With his cane in hand, he marched up to the teacher's podium.

"Good morning, students! I, the Conflagration King, have returned to the podium to educate you all on the Demon King!"

The Conflagration King, who had been on temporary leave until now, had dumbfounded the students as soon as he'd opened his mouth.

"Say, does Mr. Eldmed seem a little different to you?"

"Y-Yeah. It feels like he's more expressive now."

The students watched Eldmed warily as he continued cackling in high spirits.

"Maybe he's a bit too expressive..."

"But he was odd to begin with. Didn't he call himself a god once?"

"He did indeed."

"Why did we even take him seriously back then?"

With the disappearance of Nosgalia, his words had lost their effect. No one believed Eldmed was a god anymore. Their only remaining memory of him was of a weirdo who'd proclaimed himself a god.

The current Eldmed had inherited the Heavenly Father's power to create order. Considering his personality, if he were left to his own devices, there was a high chance he would create more trouble than Nosgalia. That's why I'd had him return to his post as a teacher at Delsgade.

Of course, he wasn't the type of man to quietly obey orders, but there was another reason he was standing at the podium.

“Before class begins, allow me to introduce the new transfer student!” Eldmed pointed his cane at the door. “Enter!”

The door slid open by magic. I stepped into the classroom and walked straight forward.

“Huh?”

“Aw, how tiny...”

“I wonder how old he is.”

“Are you even allowed to enroll here at such a young age?”

“Maybe he’s just small.”

“The current Demon King Academy accepts anyone who shows great promise.”

I came to a stop and turned to face the noisy students. “I’m Anosh Polticoal, six years old,” I declared. I had used Kursla to shrink my body to the size of a six-year-old.

I could see Sasha had an exasperated look on her face. Next to the open seat beside her, Misha was smiling faintly.

“Wow, what a surprise,” Eleonore mumbled, having been out of the loop. Zeshia’s eyes sparkled.

“Zeshia’s...an older sister now.”

“Did you, uh, know about this, Lay?” Misa whispered.

“I wasn’t told anything either.”

Eldmed tapped his cane against the floor, calling the students’ attention. “Anosh, could you introduce yourself a little more?” he asked.

“Hmm. Let’s see...” I took a step forward. “Before I came here, I was a traveling entertainer. My specialty is imitating the Demon King of Tyranny. My favorite food is mushroom gratin. There’s no spell I can’t use, but I sometimes lack common sense. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

There was a quiet round of applause. It was coming from Misha. The other students belatedly followed her lead and started clapping too.

“Sir, can we ask Anosh questions?”

“Of course. Ask all you want.”

With Eldmed’s permission, a female student in white uniform spoke up. “If you’re six years old, does that mean you’ve reincarnated?”

“I have not. I’m a genuine six-year-old.”

“Wow, that’s amazing! So you passed the transfer exam at six?” one guy wearing black asked. “Is that even possible? I thought the transfer exam was meant to be really hard.”

“Indeed. I was able to transfer in, but the exam wasn’t something the average child could pass.”

The noise in the classroom escalated. Eldmed spoke up to quiet everyone.

“Bwa ha ha! There’s nothing to be surprised about. After all, Anosh Polticoal”—the Conflagration King pointed his cane at me—“is without any doubt a *child genius*!”

If I had admitted to having reincarnated, I would have had to come up with a story about a past life. Maintaining consistency would have been an annoyance, and people would have wondered why I hadn’t used Kurst to age myself. The more I had to explain myself, the greater the likelihood that my secret would be exposed. It was better to do the opposite right from the start—that is, to gracefully insist that all was because I was a child genius.

“I see. A child genius...”

“Well, I guess that makes sense.”

“I can’t see why there wouldn’t be at least one child genius in Dilhade.”

Although there were some confused looks, everyone seemed to accept it.

“You may take any of the empty seats,” Eldmed said.

As I started walking, the other students called out to me.

“There’s a free seat over here, Anosh!”

“Come sit with us, Anosh. Let’s be friends.”

Hmm. They were quite friendly, weren't they? It was a completely different reaction from when I'd been considered a misfit. That being said, my seat had already been decided.

"Come to think of it, where are Ellen and the others, Mr. Eldmed?" one student asked.

"The Demon King's Choir is busy with official business today. They'll be arriving later in the day."

"Official business, huh? They became famous overnight."

Ever since the Demon King Reordination Ceremony, the popularity of the Demon King's Choir had skyrocketed. Their schedule was packed with requests for them to sing the Demon King hymns. The fact that they were the direct subordinates of the Demon King of Tyranny most likely played a part in that popularity, but no matter what the intentions of the demons making the requests were, it was a good thing that their songs of peace were spreading. I had allowed the girls to pursue their official duties just as long as it didn't impact their schoolwork.

"Hey, wait. He's..."

The students watching me gasped.

"No way. Is he going for that seat?"

"W-Wait, Anosh. Don't go there! That seat's bad news!"

I turned to the students that had called out to me. "Is this seat taken?"

"No, that's not—"

"Then I don't see the problem." I continued walking without a care to the seat between Sasha and Misha.

"M-Maybe he doesn't know because he's a child."

"Even if he doesn't know, this is bad. That seat belongs to Lord Anos."

"But Lord Anos isn't here anymore."

"Even then! I once sat in that seat as a joke, you know?"

"You did that?!"

“It was a joke! A harmless joke!”

“So what happened?”

“Lady Sasha came back at the worst time and sat beside me. She was all smiles, but her eyes were glowing with the Magic Eyes of Destruction, and she wouldn’t look at me the entire time.”

“I mean, you’d be dead if you made eye contact with her in that state.”

“Not only that, but Misha kept staring at me. She didn’t say a single word and had no emotion on her face!”

“I can’t believe you managed to anger Misha of all people.”

“And the finishing blow came from Eleonore! In this super cheerful tone, she went, ‘If you’re gonna sit there, you can’t complain when you’re killed, you know?’”

“Why didn’t you just move out of the way?”

“I was paralyzed with fear and couldn’t stand up!”

All eyes in the room focused on me.

“I mean, it should be obvious how bad that seat is,” another student said. “Sitting in it as a joke is practically asking to be killed. I mean, just look around. There’s Hero Kanon, those kids from the Hero Academy, the former fake Demon King, and the Necron sisters. Who would want to go near that?”

“Huh? But they’re all nice people.”

“No way. The combination’s bad no matter how you look at it. Is Hero Kanon really an ally now? Same for the fake Demon King. Why are those two even attending school?” the student said seriously.

“It’s just Lay and Misa though. They were our classmates before, remember?”

“How optimistic can you be? They’re definitely up to something. Just think about it. Why would people like them be attending school like normal students? What if they’re hiding here while planning to betray the Demon King of Tyranny one day?!”

“Ah, so Lady Sasha and Misha are here to keep an eye on them?”

“There’s no other reason why all those monsters would be gathered together in one area, right? That spot is like a warehouse of explosives. It may seem like they’re chatting peacefully among themselves, but you never know when they’ll explode.”

“*And* everyone’s too scared to mention that seat. The last teacher bowed to the seat every morning.”

“Well, I suppose it is a little hard to talk about.”

Hmm. It seemed that in my absence the seat had become somewhat of a sacred zone, and Lay and Misa had become feared by the other students. Well, students were known for their wild gossip. There was no real problem with letting them say what they wanted.

With a flick of my finger, I used magic to pull back the chair. Once I’d sat down, I turned to the side. “See? No one noticed.”

Sasha shot me a look of exasperation. Misha thought for a moment, then said, “No one yet.”

“Do you plan on staying hidden the entire time?” Sasha asked. “This is you we’re talking about—there’s no way you’ll keep your head down quietly.”

“That’s what the child genius excuse is for.”

“Oh!” Eleonore exclaimed. “You’re going to insist on that no matter what, aren’t you?”

Zeshia clenched her fists encouragingly. “The perfect plan...”

“You hear that, Sasha?”

“You should at least try to hide it more seriously.”

“That won’t be a problem. I have outstanding subordinates.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll be able to make sure things proceed smoothly. Am I wrong?”

Sasha blushed and averted her gaze. “Yeah, yeah, whatever the almighty Demon King wishes. This feels like a recipe for hardship though,” she mumbled.

“Sasha’s pleased,” Misha whispered in my ear.

“Misha! Don’t feed him weird thoughts!”

Misa giggled. “But I’m glad we get to study with you again, Anos—I mean, *Anosh*,” she said with a warm smile.

Lay leaned back in his seat and grinned at me. “What about your Demon King duties?”

“I can do them after school. Like I just said, I have outstanding subordinates. The Demon King can remain a mere symbol. Most of the entreaties of the people can be resolved by Elio and Melheis.”

If anything, it was better for me to be a mere symbol. If the Demon King of Tyranny had to deal with official business from morning to night, that would mean the world was no longer at peace.

“Back to school life it is, then?” Lay asked.

I chuckled. “That’s right.”

The students who were looking on with tense expressions let out sighs of relief.

“I-It seems like it’ll be okay.”

“They seem to be getting on well, right? I wonder what they’re talking about.”

“Why the difference?”

“Maybe it’s because he’s a kid.”

“Ugh, kids get special treatment now? That’s so unfair.”

The sound of a cane tapping the floor echoed through the room once more. The students quickly turned back to face the blackboard, where Eldmed continued speaking.

“There’s one more person I’d like to introduce today,” he said. “It’s time to meet your new sword instructor!”

§ 4. Sword Instructor of the Demon King Academy

The door opened, and then came the sound of footsteps. The man who walked with guarded steps up to the teacher's podium had white hair and uncolored eyes. His sharp, penetrating gaze turned to the students, making them flinch.

"My name is Shin Reglia. As of today, I will be the Demon King Academy's sword instructor," he said quietly.

Misa stared at him in shock. "Father?"

Hmm. It seemed like she wasn't aware Shin had been appointed as an instructor. I'd thought the Demon King Reordination Ceremony had brought them closer, but it seemed Shin was still struggling for words.

"Hey, isn't Shin Reglia the Demon King's right-hand man?"

"Yeah, I saw him at the Reordination Ceremony. And isn't he the Spirit King too now?"

"The one who's said to be able to control a thousand different demon swords?"

"Two thousand years ago, they called him the strongest demon swordsman."

"Are you serious? Someone that amazing is gonna be our sword instructor?"

"Do you think Lord Anos sent him?"

The students were quite dubious to hear that the Demon King's right-hand man and present Spirit King would be their instructor.

"Bwa ha ha!" Eldmed cackled. "Surprised, are we? The Demon King of Tyranny's closest aide will be teaching you the sword! There'll never be another opportunity like this!"

Eldmed twirled his cane around and pointed it at the students. "What's more, the Demon King Academy has come to a cooperative arrangement with the spirit school. Ennunen, the Great Tree of Learning, will be holding lectures and

trials for you all. Talks are underway to arrange for a special instructor to teach defense against spirit magic and its various uses. In addition, the demons of two thousand years ago are available as detailed individual instructors.”

Eldmed clenched his fists and grinned from ear to ear. “And, above all, the *ultimate* lecturer worthy of teaching about the Demon King is prepared to teach a new class. And the name of that class is...” The Conflagration King jumped on the spot, stomped his feet, and announced proudly, “Great Demon King Training! Bwa ha ha! With this, your futures as demon lords are all but guaranteed!”

After the dramatic declaration, the Conflagration King straightened himself and resumed speaking calmly. “Of course, the lectures and practical demonstrations of magic by yours truly will be thoroughly drilled into the abyss of your bodies. Do you know why such an exorbitant curriculum has been prepared now that the Demon King has reincarnated?” He pointed his cane at one of the students. “You there, give me an answer.”

Uniform colors no longer held any meaning in the Demon King Academy. The system of hybrids wearing white and royals wearing black had been abandoned, and the students were free to wear the color they preferred. That said, the change had only been implemented recently. Most of the students were still wearing the same uniforms as before.

The difference between white uniforms and black uniforms had been an established rule in Dilhade. Merely abolishing the system and changing the uniform color wouldn’t change the way people thought. The important part was to instill the idea that uniform color didn’t matter. Some had suggested we change the uniform completely, but it had been decided that the two uniforms would be left unchanged as a reminder to demonkind.

“Well? I’m speaking to you. What is your answer?”

“U-Um, is it because the Demon King’s reincarnation prompted talented people to gather here?” the student answered nervously.

Eldmed grinned. “Precisely! Only Demon King Anos would be able to gather so many people and for the purpose of education! Bravo indeed!”

The student exhaled in relief, seeming pleased with themselves.

“But that’s not all! It was the Demon King’s popularity that gathered people here, but what prompted him to put so much energy into education? That is what I wish to know.” Eldmed pointed his cane at the student once again. “What do you think?”

“I... I’m... I don’t know.”

“No, you do know. You should be able to figure it out. Give it some more thought. What would be different if he didn’t focus on education?”

The student racked their brains for a moment then muttered, “The future?”

“The future! That’s right. It’s the future! In other words, the Demon King is focusing on education in order to prepare for the future. Well done. You did know the answer!”

After receiving Eldmed’s praise, the student looked more confident in themself.

“Then here’s another question: why is the Demon King passionate about the future?”

“Because the present isn’t good enough...?”

“That’s exactly right. The present isn’t good enough.” The Conflagration King nodded with a glint in his eye. “And what specifically isn’t good enough?”

“I don’t know...”

“No, you do know. You can work it out. What are you lacking? What does the Demon King think isn’t good enough? What does the Demon King have that you demons don’t?”

“Everything?”

Eldmed twirled his cane and pointed at the student again. “That is correct. You did work it out. Indeed, you demons are lacking in everything—power, knowledge, wisdom, magical techniques, everything! But there’s nothing to be ashamed of. You know that.” He tapped his cane against the floor. “What the Demon King truly needs is a worthy enem— Urk!”

Eldmed clutched his throat with his left hand, as if something invisible were clamping down on his throat. It was the effect of the Zecht that decreed he

would obey me.

“S-Sir? Are you all right?”

“Ack... Ugh... Whew! Perhaps the word ‘enemy’ was a misnomer. Yes, what I should have said is ‘rival’! He needs a worthy opponent that he can compete with, one who can motivate him to keep striving for new heights! That’s what he needs!”

The change in wording freed Eldmed from the Zecht, and he straightened himself again. “Now for more questions. Is it easy to maintain peace?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Precisely. So why is it not easy?”

“Because there are multiple countries involved?”

“What makes peace between countries so hard to maintain?”

The student fell silent.

“Let’s approach this another way. Have you ever fought with a friend?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Over what?”

“Well, they said they were gonna join another team instead of joining the one I was in. So we argued over that...”

“Over such a trivial thing? Were you not friends?”

“It’s because we were friends that I wanted to be on the same team as them, so I felt like I’d been betrayed. We made up after that though.”

Eldmed grinned and pointed his cane at the student. “You felt like you’d been betrayed. But what about your friend? What if your friend had believed you would understand their decision, but felt betrayed when you didn’t?”

“I think that’s what happened, though it took some time for me to realize it.”

“Now what if we replaced your fight with one on the scale of two countries feuding?”

A look of understanding crossed the student’s face. “Ah, um, one country

would be so occupied with themselves—I mean, *with their own affairs* that in the attempt to maintain their peace, they would infringe upon the peace of another country.”

“Precisely! Wonderful. You do understand, after all! At the end of the day, the difficulties between nations can be equated to the difficulties of interpersonal relationships. People fight. Friends, lovers, strangers fight. Nations are a gathering of people, enormous organisms, chaotic mind mixtures that cannot be grasped as a whole.”

Eldmed beamed in delight, twirled his cane, and tapped it against the floor. “There’s no way conflict can be avoided! That’s why the Demon King is focusing his efforts on this academy. Looking at the country, he sees only chaos. Not even his Magic Eyes can do it. That’s why he looks to individuals and ensures each one of you receives the right education. He believes a country is the making of its people.”

If I stomped out all conflict by myself, that wouldn’t be true peace. Even when I’d split the world into four, all I’d done was prevent conflict from occurring. We were still far from true peace.

“By bestowing all of you with power, knowledge, and wisdom, the country will improve. If danger ever befalls us—or the world—he believes you will be able to avoid conflict yourselves. Bwa ha ha! What a plain and distant ideal.”

Eldmed shook with laughter. “But that is what makes this so interesting! Challenging the impossible is what makes him the Demon King! Until that dream is crushed, I, the Conflagration King, have sworn to serve as a teacher. I will shape you into fine demons no matter what it takes, for when the Demon King learns that conflict will occur regardless of education, he will ascend to the next level!”

The Zecht I’d exchanged with Eldmed was as he had just described. Gods were known to keep their promises, but there was no telling how much the now half-god, half-demon Conflagration King could be trusted. So, instead of using the Zecht to force obedience, it had been more enticing to make a proposal that would capture his interest. It was only natural that a contract of forced submission would eventually wear away and break.

The other reason I, in the form of a child, was sneaking into class was to see the results of the improved education plan from the perspective of a student. None of the students or teachers could voice themselves honestly if they knew the Demon King was among them.

“With this in mind, today’s lesson will be sword training. Mr. Shin, is there anything you wish to say before the lesson?”

“Let’s see... Today is the first lesson, so we’ll be doing something everyone can do,” Shin said matter-of-factly. “Today, everyone here will be dying once.”

The blood drained from the faces of every student in the classroom.

“Preferably twice,” he added.

§ 5. Sword Training Warm-Up

The students of first-year class two were gathered at the arena, lined up with their swords in their hands.

“Now, Mr. Shin, what will it be? Shall we start off by killing them?” Eldmed asked with delight.

“No. There’s a proper sequence to the path of the sword. We will begin with light warm-up exercises, followed by sparring practice. I still need to get an idea of the level of their swordsmanship and physical abilities.”

“Very well! Everyone, form pairs and have it out as you see fit. Mr. Shin and I will go around to assess all of you in turn.” Elmed tapped his cane against the stone floor and grinned. “Begin!”

The students of class two began to pair up with their team members or friends, ready for practice.

“There’s seven of us, so someone’s gonna be left out,” Sasha said.

Lay grinned. “Shall I take on two of you?”

“You should pair up with Anosh. No one else here can put up with that absurd strength of his.”

I let Sasha’s complaints go in one ear and out the other as I looked around the arena. “No need. I’ll find a different partner.”

“Huh?! What are you saying? No other student can survive sparring with you!”

“Don’t worry. This is the body of a six-year-old. Its strength is pretty average.” I started walking in search of a sparring partner.

“Average? Really?” Sasha muttered to herself. Misha shook her head furiously beside her.

“Yo, Anosh! Did you get left out? Let’s pair up,” a student in black called out. If I recalled correctly, this was one of the students I had once torn into eighty-

eight pieces.

“Very well.”

“All right! The name’s Ramon. Ramon Iver.”

“Pleasure.” I drew a magic circle and reached inside to pull out a child-sized iron sword.

“Wow, so you can already use storage magic, huh? That’s impressive for a little kid.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“Say, do you wanna take this to the edge of the arena?”

“I don’t mind where we are.”

“It’s easier to practice where there’s more space.”

It could have been my imagination, but there was something nasty about Ramon’s smile. Just what was he planning on doing with the new kid?

“Fair enough.”

Ramon and I moved to the edge of the arena. I could tell Sasha’s concerned gaze was focused our way. Of course, it wasn’t *my* safety that she was so worried about.

“Come to think of it, there’s something I wanted to ask you,” Ramon said, drawing the sword at his waist. “Does your black uniform mean you’re royalty, Anosh?”

My current uniform was black, unlike the uniform I’d used to wear. The reason was simply because it was better for Anosh to wear something different than Anos to avoid notice, which was also why my magic was currently disguised to resemble that of royalty. It would require someone as good at source magic as Lay or Eleonore to detect my true power, but such people were as rare now as they had been two thousand years ago. In other words, Ramon already knew I was a pureblood, yet he was asking me if I was royalty anyway.

“There’s no point in distinguishing royalty in the current Dilhade, but I suppose you could say I am.”

Ramon took the bait I dangled before him and came closer to whisper in my ear. “Just between you and me, what are your thoughts on that?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“I’m not saying I have a problem with it, of course! It’s not that. I was just curious how a fellow royal felt about Dilhade as it is now.”

So that was it. I could have ignored him if his complaints were limited to school, but that was no longer the case. The Royalists had been disbanded at my order—outwardly, that is. Although they were no longer an organization, its former members wouldn’t be so quick to change their minds.

“Unfortunately, I’m only six. I don’t know much about society.”

Ramon grinned wickedly. “I’ll let you in on something special—the world’s gone crazy. We royals are meant to be the most noble of existences. But now there are all sorts of nonsensical laws about ‘equality’ and ‘fairness.’”

No matter what I did, someone would always be dissatisfied. Of course, they were free to think whatever they wanted, as long as they didn’t harm others.

“Hmm. Come to think of it, I did hear that royalty once had special privileges,” I said, playing along.

“Yeah, that’s right. That’s how it should be—we should be the ones in control. We royals should be the ones in charge of Dilhade. Just between you and me, they’re saying the Demon King of Tyranny was planted by the Unitarians.”

Good grief. Was he really trying to teach a six-year-old this? This could no longer be considered mere complaining.

“Are you saying the current Demon King of Tyranny is a fraud?”

“D-Dumbass! Not so loud!”

Despite being a fair distance away from everyone, Ramon glanced over at Shin and Eldmed fearfully. Once he confirmed the two weren’t looking our way, he let out a sigh of relief.

“You might not have realized because you’re a child, but think about it. Isn’t it too convenient that Hero Kanon, the Demon King’s right-hand man, Great Spirit Reno, and the supposedly fake Demon King were gathered just in time for the

Reordination Ceremony? It has to be a setup.”

Did he seriously believe that, or was he just saying it to convince me? Either way, there was no reasonable conclusion to be reached from that.

“I don’t know much about the Unitarians. Are they bad people?” I asked.

Ramon nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, totally. The real Demon King won’t reincarnate. He died two thousand years ago. The Unitarians made up the reincarnated Demon King—and that’s Anos.”

“Hmm. Interesting.”

My response seemed to be favorable in Ramon’s eyes, as he continued chatting away. “It’s the duty of us Royalists to correct this distorted history, even if it means going against the current Demon King. It’s our obligation as demons of noble blood to reclaim this country for the true Demon King of Tyranny.”

Ramon continued speaking incessantly. It seemed he’d lowered his guard thanks to my childlike appearance—unless he was feigning it on purpose to hide something.

“I get it now. So the current Demon King of Tyranny is a bad guy.”

Ramon’s mouth twisted into a grin. “That’s right. Looks like we’ll get along after all, Anosh.”

He held out his hand. I accepted the handshake and decided to press him further.

“If possible, I’d like you to introduce me.”

Ramon stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“I heard there’s a resistance called the Royalists. I don’t know the details, but resistance groups are normally on the side of justice, right?”

Ramon thought for a moment. “Don’t be silly. The Royalists have been disbanded already. I’m a former member, so I accidentally spoke in the present tense out of habit just now.”

So the Royalists were seeking like-minded demons to use that speech on.

“Besides, heroes of justice can’t reveal themselves so easily,” Ramon informed me smugly. “That said, I’m willing to introduce my friends if we see eye to eye.”

He laughed suggestively. I didn’t know how large the resistance group was, but there was no doubt he was a member. It seemed he was willing to introduce me if I stuck around him, but that was a little more trouble than I wanted to go through.

Perhaps I could prove my worth to him another way. The resistance was likely after as much power as they could get to oppose the Demon King’s Army. If they were willing to approach a child, they must really be lacking in personnel.

“I’ll be useful to you.”

“Ha ha! Don’t get cocky. You’re just a kid.”

I held my iron sword at the ready. “I can prove it.”

Ramon laughed again. He was still treating me like a child. “All right. How good are you with a sword?”

“Unfortunately, not very. My specialty is magic.”

“So I figured. You may be a child genius, but there’s a limit to the muscles and magic such a small body can have.” Ramon distanced himself and pointed his demon sword at me. “All right, I’ll go easy on you. First, I’m gonna swing my sword down from overhead, so try and block it. If you can do it, you’ll pass.”

“Hmm. Very well. Challenge me to your heart’s content.”

“Oh? Those are some big words for a little kid. You know that words alone won’t make you a hero of justice, right?” Ramon slowly lifted his sword and took one step towards me. “Here goes! Block or you’ll get hurt!”

He started running. As he ran, every movement he made looked to be in slow motion. That wasn’t a metaphor—he was actually slow. The slowest thing I’d ever seen. He was slow enough to make me wonder how much longer it’d take him to reach me.

“Hraaagh!”

Finally, his demon sword came swinging down.

“Hmm. Blocking...”

I held the sword in my hand up high and easily blocked the swing. The screech of metal clashing against metal rang out before—

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Ramon was unable to endure the magic bolstering my defense. He was blown back and lodged deep in the arena wall behind him.

“Like this?”

Ramon’s magic disappeared. It was an instant death. Noise immediately broke out among the other students in the arena.

“What was that? That was Ramon who went flying just now, right?”

“Did Anosh do that to him?”

“Y-Yeah. But all he did was block Ramon’s sword.”

“Why would the person attacking rebound like a ball?”

“He’s just a kid, right? What kind of technique was that?”

“Hey, did Ramon die? I can’t feel his magic at all...”

The moment the students noticed his death, Ramon opened his eyes. He’d been revived with Ingall.

“What?! He came back to life!”

“That was that resurrection spell, right? The one Lord Anos used at the entrance exam.”

“Did Anosh use it just now? It wasn’t Mr. Eldmed, was it? But how? He’s only six!”

“If he can use the same magic as Lord Anos at that age, he’s more than just a genius!”

I walked slowly up to Ramon. “Did you think a child would be unable to defend himself?”

Dumbfounded, Ramon stared at me and gulped. “Who are you?”

I chuckled. “Anosh Polticoal, an average child genius with big dreams of

becoming a hero of justice.”

§ 6. The Sword Instructor's Guidance

The arena was silent.

The scene the students had just witnessed resembled something they'd seen once before. The thought was written all over their faces. Whether they had wanted him to or not, the misfit now known as the Demon King of Tyranny had crossed their minds.

"Not bad," Sasha said in a natural tone, her voice loud enough for the other students to hear. "As expected of a child genius." She smiled smugly, flipping her twintails elegantly over her shoulders. "But you still have a long way to go."

Her words implied that while Anosh was a genius, he couldn't compare to the Demon King of Tyranny.

"R-Right. That looked super impressive to me just now, but if Lady Sasha still thinks he has room for improvement..."

"Yeah, I thought I was looking at Lord Anos himself, but I guess that isn't possible."

"We should have looked deeper into his abyss."

If the Witch of Destruction from Anos's own team was claiming this, then the students had no choice but to agree with her. No matter how impressive the kid's moves appeared to them, that must only be because they weren't looking deep enough into the abyss. They'd failed to measure my power from the start, so they had no choice but to believe her. For something she'd come up with on the spot, Sasha's excuse was flawless—or at least it would have been if not for Eldmed.

"My, how wonderful! As one would expect from a boy genius! It's as if I'm before the Demon King of Tyranny himself," the Conflagration King said proudly, failing to read the room. She shot him a sharp glare.

The students started muttering among themselves again.

“Huh? If Mr. Eldmed’s saying that, then maybe Anosh is amazing after all.”

“So it seems...”

Sasha smiled elegantly. “Why, you’re so gracious towards your students, Mr. Eldmed.”

Her words were a little slower than usual—she was probably thinking of how to smooth over the situation.

“But even though he might appear perfect at first glance, he *is* just a child.”

All eyes were on her.

“If Lady Sasha’s saying that, there must be a reason, right?”

“She’s not the type of person to throw around baseless claims. I wonder what he did wrong.”

“Shh! She’s about to explain.”

“I want to hear too!”

Sasha stiffened. She turned to me as though she were looking into my abyss and opened her mouth...

“Right, Misha? Don’t you think so too?”

...and then left the rest up to her sister.

Misha blinked a few times. “The formation of his spell formula was slow. If he had activated Ingall a few moments later, he would have failed to revive Ramon.”

I’d made sure to make use of the full three seconds Ingall had before bringing Ramon back, but Misha had chosen her words to make it sound as though I’d been close to failing. It was a clever idea.

“His swordsmanship wasn’t that impressive either,” Lay added. “Sure, he deflected the force of the blow, but most of that was due to Ramon’s inexperience. Ramon basically tripped and fell with his own momentum.”

It had actually been quite a feat of strength, but Lay made it sound like nothing. His lies were as bold as he was.

“So that’s what it was... The Demon Swordmaster sure knows what to look out for. All I could tell was that Anosh’s magic was flowing a little oddly, but Ramon must just have been worse than we thought. I hadn’t considered that.”

“Does that mean Ramon basically died by tripping and launching himself into the wall?”

“How reckless can you be?”

Eleonore interrupted the chatter to jokingly scold Ramon. “I know Anosh is cute and all, but that doesn’t mean you can rush at him so recklessly!”

The rest of the class giggled. Ramon looked humiliated, but he still couldn’t move. He was buried so deep into the wall, his arms and legs were constrained by stone.

“It was a good match,” I said, using magic to pull him free. Once he was finally unrestrained, he turned to me.

“I thought you said you weren’t very good with a sword.”

“Hmm. If you hadn’t held back on me, there’s no telling what the outcome would have been.”

Ramon looked at me blankly.

“You were trying to let me have the spotlight as the new transfer student, no?”

“Uh, y-yeah, that’s right! You get it, don’t you?! If I’d been serious, the outcome might have been different... Ha ha!”

Hmm. That was quite the attitude for someone who’d been dead only moments before. He truly was a petty underling through and through.

“Say, do you have time after class?” he asked me.

“I do.”

“Then come with me. I’ll take you somewhere interesting.”

It seemed he’d determined I was worth something after all. Now, where would he take me?

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“I left something in the classroom, so I’m gonna go get it.”

With those parting words, Ramon quietly sneaked out of the arena.

Thanks to Sasha’s quick wit, the rest of the class had lost interest in us and returned to their own devices. The members of my team were also swinging their swords. Sasha had paired up with Misha, Eleonore with Zeshia, and Lay with Misa.

“Here goes!” Sasha called, swinging her sword with all her might.

“Okay,” Misha replied, knocking it away with her own.

Although both of them were crossing swords seriously, their strikes were lacking impact. When compared to their magic abilities, Misha and Sasha’s sword skills were terrible. They couldn’t even handle demon swords yet.

“Hyah!”

“Hah.”

The two swung at the same time, but before their blades made contact, a single cane appeared between them, blocking the two of them at once.

“That’s enough,” the Conflagration King said. “That’s some poor swordwork for subordinates of the Demon King.”

Sasha glared at Eldmed sullenly, but she couldn’t argue with the truth.

“If you’re going to be lousy with a sword, you should at least be able to handle demon swords.” Eldmed drew a magic circle, pulled out two demon swords, and stabbed them into the ground. “Now, try to draw them.”

Sasha looked at the sword before her and frowned. “I’ve tried this loads before, but I don’t have any affinity for demon swords.”

Misha nodded in agreement.

“Then today may be the day your hard work bears fruit. Go on. Give it a shot.”

Misha and Sasha grasped the hilts of the demon swords, but even with all their strength and magic, the swords didn’t budge.

“Hah... Hah...” Sasha panted. “See? It’s no good.”

“Bwa ha ha! Not bad, not bad at all. You’re almost there.”

“Really? It doesn’t show any sign of listening on my end.”

Eldmed tapped his cane against the ground. “Witch of Destruction, what you are lacking is consideration towards the demon sword. A demon sword is not a tool. Try treating it as your equal instead.” He immediately pointed his cane at Misha. “Little sister of the Witch, you are the opposite. Be more arrogant. Make it obey you. Command it. Demon swords have their own pride. They will not select a gentle demon as their owner.”

Sasha and Misha made a second attempt to draw the swords as Eldmed looked on with a grin.

“That’s right. Just like that. You’re doing splendidly! The other thing you’re both lacking in is confidence. Demon swords are drawn when you believe they’ll be drawn. Send your magic and conviction into their sources—there’s no way you’ll fail to draw them. Demon swords of this level cannot disobey demons with as much magic as you two!” he said in encouragement. “I, the Conflagration King, have Eyes second only to the Demon King when it comes to spying potential! Now, now, just a little more! You can do it in the next three seconds! Let’s see it now—three, two, one!”

The next moment, it was like a gear clicked into place. Sasha and Misha pulled their demon swords out of the ground with ease.

“Ah! I did it...”

“I’m shocked.”

Eldmed cackled. “What’s there to be shocked by? The Demon King himself recognizes you as his subordinates. You may not be the best at controlling demon swords, but that doesn’t mean you can’t do it. You have enough power for it.”

After saying this over his shoulder, Eldmed turned his gaze to the other groups of students. “You there! You have a good swing in you, but a lot of your strength is going to waste. You won’t be able to land a scratch on the Demon King like th— Ugh!”

Despite the breathing difficulties incurred by our Zecht, Eldmed continued

strolling around, delightedly instructing the students. Elsewhere in the arena, two more students were sparring with each other closely.

“Hah!”

“Ah!”

A blade spun through the air and clattered to the ground. Lay had knocked Misa’s sword out of her hand.

“Aha ha, sorry. I’m not much of an opponent.”

Misa picked up her fallen sword. She’d lost her grip on it ten times already. Lay lowered his own weapon and walked up to her.

“I’ve been wondering about this for a while now, but are you not going to use your true power?”

“Huh?”

Lay smiled cheerfully. “You should be able to turn into your true form without any problems now, right?”

“Ah, yeah. Aha ha, right.”

“According to your lore, you’re now the reincarnation of Avos Dilhevia. It should be no trouble for you to hold me off.”

Misa hung her head, still hesitating. “That may be true, but I’m a little scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“I’m currently in my transient form, so I’m still how I was before. But when I turn into my true form, my personality changes a little.” Misa offered him a strained smile. “I’ll probably end up being more like Avos Dilhevia.”

“Will your mind get taken over?”

“Oh, no. That won’t happen. We’ve properly become one, so even my true form feels like a part of me now. But still...” She looked at him nervously. “I don’t want you to hate me.”

“It’s okay.” Lay placed his hand over Misa’s holding her sword. “My feelings won’t change no matter how you look or what you say. As long as you’re you,

I'll love you."

Staring up at him, Misa blushed.

"Misa, show me your true self."

With an embarrassed look, Misa nodded.

"You seem to be rather bored with the class, Lay Grandsley."

Lay whirled around to see Shin standing behind him, glaring at him with a piercing gaze. That gaze carried enough killing intent to make a hero of countless battles to jump aside in fear of his life.

Without a single emotion, Shin spoke. "If you're lacking an opponent, you may face me instead." He drew a magic circle, reached inside, and pulled out Gilionojos, the Pillage Blade. "As I said earlier"—Shin's eyes glinted coldly—"you'll be dying here today. At least three times."

The number had increased.

§ 7. The Hero's Blade and the Parent's Destiny

"Um, father?" Misa looked at Shin warily. "You've got the wrong idea. I was too embarrassed to show my true self, so Lay was helping ease my nerves. We weren't trying to slack off from class or any—"

"Misa," Shin said in a matter-of-fact tone, "you are currently in class. I am not your father right now. Do not mix public and personal affairs."

Misa hung her head in shame. "Sorry."

Shin took a few steps to distance himself. "Come to think of it, Lay Grandsley, where were you three nights ago?"

"What do you mean?" Lay asked, his smile fixed on his face.

"Nothing in particular." Shin stopped and turned towards Lay. "It's just that my daughter came home late three nights ago." A chilling bloodlust could be seen in his eyes. "I shall ask you once again—where were you three nights ago?"

Magic flowed from Shin's hand into the Pillage Blade, making it gleam menacingly. It was a complete mix of public and personal affairs.

"Father, I told you I was late because I went to Ellen's house! Ellen even said so herself, remember?"

Shin immediately dismissed Misa's excuse. "She had choir practice that day. Her schedule ended at sunset, but my liege was working late at the castle."

"Uh... What does that mean?"

"The girls of the Demon King's Choir are extremely loyal, but Ellen in particular is what I'd consider a perfect example. A loyal retainer like her would never leave the castle before my liege."

Loyal retainers could instantly recognize each other. After watching the fan union girls devote themselves to the Demon King's Choir every day, Shin had formed an opinion of them. In other words, he was probably thinking Misa had

asked Ellen to lie for her.

“She sometimes goes home early too.” Misa laughed nervously. That excuse wasn’t going to work on Shin.

“I’m not asking you, Misa. Step back. It’s dangerous.”

“B-But, father, I can’t let you do anything bad to Lay—”

“It’s not ‘father.’”

“Right...”

Left with no other choice, Misa backed away helplessly. She shot Lay a worried look, which he returned a cheery grin as though to say it would be okay.

“Answer me, Lay Grandsley.”

“It’s not like you’d believe me.” With one hand, Lay drew a magic circle. Divine light gathered there as the Sword of Three Races was summoned. He grasped Evansmana with his right hand. “So I’ll answer with my sword instead.”

“I will recognize that valor of yours, but the moment I sense anything devious in your swordsmanship, I will not hesitate to slice you apart.”

Lay and Shin faced one another, ready to duel. Misa looked between the two of them in confusion.

“Uh, Lay? Isn’t that the Sword of Three Races? The holy sword made to destroy the Demon King? And, father, what are you trying to steal with the Pillage Blade? M-Maybe you should both calm down!”

But the two were focused on each other’s sword, sparks flying from the intensity of their gazes.

“Aha ha... What should I do?”

“Oh, there’s nothing to be concerned about.”

Misa spun around. She seemed surprised to see me beside her.

“Nothing to be concerned about? What do you mean, Anosh?”

“Shin was a man who didn’t know love, but by having you as a daughter, he

has obtained the love a parent has for their child. And, because of his inexperience with love, he's unable to suppress that emotion."

It seemed that Misa was struggling to understand what I meant, so I continued.

"Simply put, he cannot hold back his parental instincts. To think the man who didn't know love could be this doting. It's a heartwarming sight."

"But the swords they're holding aren't heartwarming at all."

"Every parent with a daughter must walk down this path. Lay must endeavor with all his sincerity and win you with his own hands. That being said, Shin isn't the most socially competent man. They cannot use words to understand one another, so Lay is challenging him to communicate with their swords instead."

"Communicate with their swords?"

"At their skill level, they can understand the intensity of one another's emotions by merely crossing blades."

"Is that how it works?" Misa watched the two of them skeptically. The other students had noticed the duel about to begin and had gathered around to watch them.

"Hey, look at that. The demon sword Mr. Shin's holding... Isn't it kind of crazy? How much magic is in that thing?"

"Forget about that! Lay drew the Sword of Three Races! Wasn't that the holy sword forged to kill the Demon King?!"

"Hold on. Hold on a minute... Isn't this a showdown between Hero Kanon and the Demon King's right-hand man?!"

"Have they still not settled their differences from two thousand years ago? Maybe Mr. Shin's using the lesson as an excuse to purge the Hero..."

"I mean, why else would they draw those huge-ass swords here?"

The students held their breaths and backed away from the two of them. They clearly didn't want to get caught in the cross fire.

"Bwa ha ha! Everyone, put down your swords and observe these two. Mr.

Shin's about to demonstrate what he mentioned at the start of the lesson. You'll learn far more by watching this than doing warm-ups."

"At the start... You mean that thing about dying?"

"Precisely! Two thousand years ago, dying was just a part of life. Overcoming death was the norm. Thus, you students will never reach that level without experiencing death! Knowing the line between life and death can, quite literally, make the difference between life and death!"

Eldmed tapped his cane against the ground. "There's one more benefit to experiencing death, and that is Ingall. Ingall is the ultimate spell cast directly on the source! By being separated from your body, you gain awareness of your death and become capable of perceiving your own source. Once that happens, you'll be able to understand exactly what the Ingall spell formula means!"

The Conflagration King cackled loudly. "As expected of Shin Reglia! By swiftly making you all experience death, he can teach you how to perceive your own sources—a skill necessary to understand the fundamentals of combat. This tough yet subtle teaching style is exactly what the right hand of the Demon King should practice!"

He pointed his cane at the two of them. "Watch carefully, all of you," he said quietly.

Lay started running. Shin appeared in front of him, having already predicted his move.

"Hah!"

The Sword of Three Races clashed with the Pillage Blade. Shock waves of tremendous magic spread from the point of impact, ruffling uniforms and hair. Evansmana had greater magic than its counterpart, but Shin was winning in technique. The two men, locked in a fierce exchange, made eye contact.

"First to three points?" Lay asked.

"So be it."

A faint light enveloped the two of them. It was Aske, but the purpose of the spell wasn't to convert feelings into magic—it was to make the feelings

conveyed through their swords more evident to one another.

“Hyaaaah!”

Drawing on all the strength of the Sword of Three Races, Lay pushed Shin back. Shin briefly lost his balance, and Lay swung Evansmana at his right side.

But it was a trap. Shin had created a fake opening to lure Lay into attacking. He evaded with ease, stepping forward and swinging the Pillage Blade with perfect timing.

However, the strike that should have been impossible to avoid swept through empty space. Lay’s move had also been a trap, and he had seized the chance to step behind Shin.

Shin spun around, swinging Gilionojos as Lay brought Evansmana down. The two swords flashed, forming a cross in the air. Wind and magic blasted outwards as they made contact.

“How dull and direct.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

“But your technique is still poor.”

Blood sprayed from Lay’s right shoulder. Shin had struck him faster than the eye could see.

“Ugh!”

They crossed blades once again, exchanging over a dozen blows in the span of a single breath. A new cut appeared on Lay’s right leg.

“It’s not over yet!”

They collided for a third time. Shin parried the Sword of Three Races that Lay swung with all his might, and slashed the right side of his chest.

“Tsk!” Lay jumped back, creating distance between them.

“Your ability to evade is impressive. It isn’t easy to avoid the Pillage Blade taking something from you. But how long will that last?”

Shin’s skill with a sword was more fiendish than ever. Spurred on by his love for his daughter, he was completely overwhelming Lay.

“Um, isn’t it over already? You said it was a three-point match, didn’t you? Father, you already got three hits in, no?”

“What are you saying, Misa? I haven’t received a single point yet.”

Misa looked at him in confusion.

“A three-point match ends when one side dies three times.”

“Dies?!”

“Don’t worry,” I said from beside her. “This method of dueling was commonplace two thousand years ago. Both Shin and Lay are used to it.”

Misa pursed her lips as she watched the match.

“Hmm. It seems neither side’s willing to back down.”

“It looks like they’re seriously trying to kill each other. Are they really communicating like that?”

“Yes. Allow me to interpret for you.” I used Leaks to convey to Misa the emotions I was reading from their duel. “This is my own interpretation, so some of the meaning might be lost in translation. The gist of it should be there though.”

At that moment, Lay moved. Just like before, he pushed Shin back, creating distance between them, then swung the Sword of Three Races down with all his might. Courage overflowed from his sword.

Please give me your daughter!

Shin’s sword blocked Evansmana’s fierce slash.

No.

Shin’s immeasurable determination was flowing out of his demon sword, but Lay continued his onslaught without a care. He released thirty slashes in a single breath, attacking rapidly without pause. But Shin’s demon sword kept up with

his pace, glinting with each swing.

Their blades reached maximum speed, colliding faster than the eye could see. It was truly as though they were hurling their unyielding emotions at one another. Hero Kanon and the Demon King's right-hand man dueled with holy sword and demon sword, their conviction and pride on the line. The challenger was Kanon, and the defender was Shin. Their heavy emotions collided, creating sparks like the ones flying from their swords.

Surrender your daughter! I'll bring her happiness at the cost of my life!

No, no, no, no, no, no!

"Amazing. Your style is so flexible, yet immovable at its core."

"That just means you're a hundred years too early."

"I will overcome those hundred years by exchanging blows with you!"

Lay used Evansmana to absorb the Pillage Blade's momentum as though he were absorbing Shin's techniques. Shin's body wavered slightly as his own power was used against him.

What part of me isn't good enough? I'll fix all my flaws!

The sword he swung so desperately in order to have his relationship acknowledged was truly the blade of a hero. No regular person could display such resolution. It was his earnesty that had allowed him to use his full strength right from the start. It wasn't easy to make up one's mind to such an extent. This was a marriage proposal only possible because he was Hero Kanon.

What utter nonsense. With this level of skill, you're not ready for marriage. You can't protect my daughter!

But that swing of resolution was mercilessly struck down without question.

That was the Demon King's right-hand man for you. He dismissed all logic and reason with his blunt refusal, and he had the impregnable sword skills to defend his irrationality.

Surrender your daughter! Please, give me your daughter! Please give her to me, please!

Never, never, never, never, never, never! Not in a hundred years!

Blades crossed as sword clashed with sword, but in contrast to the fierce blows being exchanged, the magic of the two swordsmen was fading with every moment. Each was aiming to perform their sword's hidden art: a finishing blow to end the match. For Lay, who had seven sources, that was nearly impossible to accomplish. The first to succeed was Shin.

"Pillage Blade, first hidden art..."

Gilionojos bent like a whip, lashing out at Lay as though it were alive.

"Dispossession."

Return my daughter to me!

Six consecutive slashes struck in an instant. Lay was helpless against the attack and fell heavily to the ground. His life had been taken six times.

"That's six points. Come back in two hundred years."

"Lay!" Horrified, Misa ran up to Lay, but a magic circle appeared around his body. It was Ingall.

Lay sat up slowly. Shin's cold gaze pierced him.

"If you've learned your lesson, stop taking Misa out so late. Otherwise, I'll be taking your sources instead next time." Shin turned his back and walked away.

"Father... I mean, sir, please wait!"

As Misa started running towards Shin, he staggered and fell to one knee.

“Ah... A-Are you okay?” She peered into her father’s face worriedly.

“Yes,” he said, touching the left side of his chest. It was stained red. “Heaven Splitter...” he muttered.

It was near impossible for Lay, a man of seven sources, to call upon the hidden art of a sword. But just then, there’d been a brief moment when he’d been pushed to his limits. His attack hadn’t been enough to take Shin’s life, but there was no denying it had been too fast for his Eyes to see.

“Now that I think about it, Reno proposed to me right away too.”

After losing himself in his memories for a moment, Shin stood up.

“Misa, I have just one thing to say to you,” he said with his back to her. “I will not allow you to date anyone who cannot defeat me.”

“But that rules out basically everyone. You’re too strong, father.”

Shin walked away without paying her complaint any mind—but paused and added one more warning. “Also, don’t lie about your whereabouts. If you’re going to be home late, contact me through Leaks. I won’t ask why.”

“Huh? What does—”

“Reno will worry.”

Misa turned to Lay, beaming. He returned her smile with a grin. Meanwhile, Shin marched briskly away. Perhaps, just a little, the Sword of Three Races had cut through that stubborn parental love that refused to acknowledge their relationship.

§ 8. Hero of Justice

The second lecture hall.

The Conflagration King had just finished his explanation of a spell formula through the use of dramatic gestures when the bell rang, ending the class before he could select students to practice the spell.

“Hmph. Is it already over? Fine, we’ll stop here for today. Don’t forget to revise the spell we just covered! And make sure you don’t practice casting Ingall on each other. At your level, you may end up dying permanently. Bwa ha ha!”

He left the classroom while still laughing joyously.

“He doesn’t need to say that twice,” Sasha muttered weakly. “Who’d want to do something like that? Come to think of it, why does my head hurt so much? Ingall didn’t fail, did it?”

During training earlier, Sasha had died twice. Of course, she had immediately been revived with Ingall.

“It’s just a minor case of death sickness,” I explained, “a common occurrence when you’re not used to dying. Its potency can depend on your constitution, but you’ll get used to it soon enough.”

“I don’t want to get used to it.” Sasha lay face down on her desk, looking unwell. Misha made her way over to her and patted her head gently. “How come you’re fine, Misha?” Sasha shook her head. “Everyone else is good and lively.”

Misha looked up. Lay, Misa, Eleonore, and Zeshia appeared to be completely unaffected.

“I’m used to dying.” Lay shrugged.

“Oh, I’ve never experienced death before, but I think I’m fine because my lore is the legend of Avos Dilhevia,” Misa said.

Eleonore held up her index finger. “Source magic’s my specialty, so maybe

that's why. I'm also the Demon King's magic."

"It was Zeshia's first time, but I'm fine..."

Sasha glared at them all hatefully. "It's not fair. Are all heroes this good at dying?" She staggered to her feet. "Say, does anyone wanna go to a café? I wanna drink something cold."

Misha nodded in agreement.

"Oooh, that sounds great! Let's go somewhere with alcohol!" Eleonore piped up happily. In her head, she was already deciding what she would order.

"A drink after school...is the best..."

"You're too young to be drinking alcohol, Zeshia. I'll order a mocktail for you, okay?"

"Zeshia will wait..." Zeshia looked disappointed.

"Are there any joints that serve alcohol at this hour?" Lay asked Misa.

"I don't drink, so I'm not sure," she replied.

Sasha looked at me. "Will you be coming too, Anosh?" she asked, then leaned in to whisper in my ear. "It won't look strange if you return to being Anos and meet up with us there."

"Hmm. Unfortunately, I have a prior engagement to attend to."

"Huh?"

Just as Sasha was looking at me confusedly, a student in the black school uniform came over. It was Ramon.

"Let's go, Anosh."

"Sure thing." I got down from my chair and turned to Sasha and the others. "I received an interesting invitation."

Sasha shot Ramon a pitying look. She immediately leaned in to whisper to me again. "Inviting you of all people... He has my condolences."

I responded with a smirk. "I'll see you all later," I said. With that, I walked over to Ramon. "So, where are we going?"

“That’s a surprise for when we get there,” Ramon said smugly.

So it was a place he was hesitant to mention in the classroom. If I was lucky, he might just take me to the hideout of the resistance group itself. At the very least, I should be able to meet other remnants of the Royalists.

Just then, the door to the classroom slammed open. The eight girls of the Anos Fan Union rushed inside.

“W-We made it!” Ellen cried when she spotted the students still in the room. She then looked over at the podium and noticed the lack of a teacher there.

“Huh? Did we not make it?”

“The teacher isn’t here...”

“B-But it might be break time!”

“Isn’t it the last class of the day? There shouldn’t be another break.”

The fan union girls stood there in confusion. Their duties as the Demon King’s Choir must have run overtime, making them late for class.

“Unfortunately, the last class just finished,” I called out to them.

“Aw, okay. Thanks.” Ellen turned to me and froze. “L-L-Lord Anos?!” she shrieked. “Why have you become so adorab—I mean, so deliciou—I mean, so mouthwatering?!”

“C-Calm down, Ellen! You’re making it worse every time you correct yourself!”

“Aaah! I mean, no, that’s not, uh— Why have you become so small?! And... Huh? Why are you at school?”

Hmm. My source was hidden, yet she’d seen through me in an instant.

“Sorry, but you’ve got the wrong person. I’m the new transfer student, Anosh Polticoal.”

“Anosh Polticoal? But...”

The fan union girls stared at my face. Their expressions seemed to be saying they were confident that I was Anos.

“Anos became small?” Ramon muttered, turning to look at me.

Hmm. It wasn't a good idea to let him get too suspicious. He might become more wary about taking me to meet the resistance group.

Well, there was no need to fret. After all, I had brilliant followers on my side. I turned to Sasha and gave her a pointed look. Although she looked startled at the sudden demand, she immediately nodded and opened her mouth. "Jeez, don't be silly, Ellen. Have you started seeing Anos in everything? Do you miss him that much?"

"Huh? Oh..."

"You were talking to a bronze statue as though it were Anos the other day too, weren't you? I know you worship him, but at least keep it to your own room."

Ellen snapped back to her senses with a gasp. "Oh no! I did it again!"

The other girls promptly responded.

"Jeez! There goes Ellen's Lord Anos withdrawal symptoms again!"

"Honestly, she thinks anything's Lord Anos if it bears even the slightest resemblance."

"She said the orchestra conductor's baton was similar to Lord Anos last time."

"How is that similar?!"

"W-Well Lord Anos hasn't banned idolatry!" Ellen cried.

"What kind of reasoning is that? Besides, you can worship objects, but you shouldn't do it to people."

Ramon narrowed his eyes at the fan union, this time for a completely different reason. "Anosh does look kinda similar to Lord Anos, doesn't he? Especially the eyes."

Ellen stared at my face again. "Are you a relative?" she asked.

"I'm a royal. It wouldn't be odd for me to look similar in some respects."

"You also talk like Lord Anos."

"Oh, I was a traveling entertainer for a while. I learned how to imitate the Demon King of Tyranny, and the speech just stuck."

When she heard that, Ellen perked up. “Then...will you show us an imitation, Anosh?” she asked nervously.

“Very well.” I hopped into the air and landed on the teacher’s podium. “I am Anosh Polticoal, the Demon King of Tyranny,” I declared boldly. “Did you really think that because I’m a child, I’m not the Demon King of Tyranny?”

“Awaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Squealing, Ellen threw herself at me. She pressed her cheek against mine and ruffled my hair. “Lord Anosh! You’re so adorable!”

“N-No fair, Ellen! I want to pet Lord Anosh too! Don’t hog him to yourself!”

“No, get your own. Besides, you’re the one who said not to worship people.” Ellen hugged me close as though to defend me, but there was a shadow sneaking up behind her.

“Got him!” Nono cried, snatching me away and squeezing me tightly. “Lord Anosh, you’re so small... Nono will look after you from now on. Let’s go home together, okay?”

This time, Jessica grabbed me, hugging me by the head. “No fair, no fair! I want Lord Anosh too!”

“My turn next! Everyone line up. We all get seven seconds each. Contact is limited to B-rank areas. Hey! Maia, that spot’s rank A!”

“All right everyone, let’s do this! We’re going to pass Lord Anosh around *fairly!*”

At that moment, a dangerous glint entered in the girls’ eyes. Their movements afterwards were rapid. The eight fan union girls quickly formed a neat circle and passed me around like a baton. They even made an impromptu and highly nonsensical song to go along with it.

“Form a circle; pass him round!”

“Pass around Lord Anosh!”

“Round and round for lots of fun!”

“Round and round goes Lord Anosh!”

That aside, it was my first time being treated in such a way. I supposed even the Demon King of Tyranny could only be treated like this during times of peace.

“Nice one. After that much disrespect, no one should suspect him, right?” Lay whispered.

Sasha glared at the girls, somewhat offended on my behalf. “It looks to me more like they’re using that as an excuse to fulfill their own desires.”

“Hmm. Are you almost done?”

“Oh! Our apologies, Lord Anosh.”

The fan union girls shrunk back, taking three steps away from me.

“It’s fine. I can be the idol of your Demon King whenever you want.” I left after those words, returning to Ramon. “Sorry for the wait.”

“Nah, it’s okay.” Ramon looked stunned by what had just happened, even if he didn’t comprehend it. “Those girls are always like that, so I’ve stopped trying to make sense of it. Let’s go.”

“Right.”

We left the second lecture hall and exited the Demon King Castle. Ramon walked straight down the streets of Midhaze. He was heading in the direction of the Necron family estate—in the area where the most influential families of Dilhade lived. Perhaps there was a bigger name involved in this than I’d thought.

“Anosh.” Ramon came to a stop at a three-way intersection. “You said you admired the Royalists for being the heroes of justice, right?”

“Yeah.”

“The truth is, I know who the heroes of justice are,” he said quietly, as though he was sharing a secret.

“I’m intrigued. Will you let me meet them?”

“I’d love to introduce you to the people you admire, but those on the side of justice have to be careful. That Demon King has his eyes on them, you see. The

second they try to do anything, the Midhaze army will be upon them. Do you get what this means?”

“That trust comes first.”

“You really are clever for a kid, huh? That’s right—we can’t just bring anyone along to meet our comrades, or we’d be risking everyone’s lives.”

Ramon drew a magic circle. It was Zecht.

“If you want to meet them, you have to swear an oath of brotherhood with me. They’ll trust you if I tell them we’ve been in this together for a while.”

Hmm. So he wasn’t foolish enough to take me there without conditions.

“I don’t mind, but can you really trust me when you only met me today?”

“You’re not a bad person. I can tell that much by looking at you.”

Hmm. That was a lie. Ramon was most likely at the bottom rung of this resistance, which was why he was so anxious to make a name for himself. He probably believed he could rise in the ranks of the Royalists if he employed the abilities I’d displayed in class that day. There was no other reason he’d risk bringing someone he had just met to meet his comrades.

“But in the adult world, it isn’t enough to trust with the heart. This Zecht will ensure that you obey whatever order I give you. If you sign it, I’ll let you meet the person I trust the most in the world. How does that sound?” Ramon suggested nervously. He must have really been desperate not to let this opportunity slip past him.

“Fine.” I signed the Zecht without hesitation.

Ramon sighed in relief. “We’re in this together now, brother.”

“So we are.”

Ramon resumed his walk, heading straight through the intersection with a spring in his step. Before long, the Angart family’s estate came into view.

The Angart family was directly descended from the Seven Demon Elders and heavily involved in Midhaze’s politics. Demon Lord Elio trusted them deeply, and they weren’t known for being Royalists. Apparently, that had all been a

facade.

“Well? Even a child like you should know where we are, right?”

“The Angart family estate?”

“Heh. That’s right. Let’s go—I’ll take you to the head of the family.”

I followed Ramon into the mansion.

§ 9. Savior of the Royalists

We climbed the stairs to the top floor of the mansion and came upon an obnoxiously extravagant door. Ramon stood in front of it and knocked.

“It’s Ramon Iver!” he called loudly.

“Enter,” a voice replied from within.

“If you’ll excuse me.”

He opened the door and let us into an office. Armored demons equipped with swords stood at attention on either side of the room. At the back was an ornately decorated desk with a man sitting behind it.

The man had pale, bluish skin and a white beard. His frame was tall and spindly, and he had a nervous look on his face but a sharp look in his eyes. I had seen him once before when I’d gathered all the influential people of Midhaze—the magic flowing from his source confirmed that this was indeed the same person.

Zerceus Angart was the head of the Angart family and the second most powerful demon in the city, after its Demon Lord. He attended all the meetings to decide Midhaze policies, and always offered valuable opinions. If anything, the proposals he put forward were rather strict towards the Royalists, but that must have been a cover for his true persuasions.

“Is this the new like-minded comrade of ours you mentioned?” Zerceus asked.

“Yes. This is my sworn brother, Anosh Polticoal.”

I stepped forward and addressed Zerceus. “I’m Anosh Polticoal, six years old. I came here because I’m interested in the activities of the Royalist resistance. Are you the leader?”

Zerceus furrowed his brow at my greeting.

“M-My apologies, Lord Zerceus! He speaks like this to everyone.”

Most demons didn’t care about how they were spoken to, but it seemed that

this wasn't the case for Zercean.

"Fine, I'll allow it. I'm a lenient man. The words of a child don't bother me." He rested his chin on his hands. "But I must ask you something, Ramon. As you are aware, we are currently in need of as many comrades as we can gather. However, that doesn't mean we will pick up any old stray you find on the street. We're working towards a noble cause. Do you understand this?"

Ramon nodded hurriedly, flustered by Zercean's intensity. "O-Of course. Anosh may be a child, but his power and skill are both incredible. You just need to see him in action. He might even become our trump card—"

"Ramon."

Zercean silenced Ramon with a sharp glare. Ramon shrunk back and shut his mouth.

"I am not asking for your opinion. I will be the one to decide whether he is of any use to us. All you need to focus on is recruiting more sympathizers."

Ramon nodded in vexation. "R-Right."

As I'd expected, Ramon was at the bottom of the ladder here—a gofer sent out to recruit Royalist sympathizers to the resistance, it seemed.

"Anosh, was it? We don't discriminate based on age here, but if you wish to join our ranks, you must prove your strength." Zercean snapped his fingers, and the six soldiers on the sides of the room lined up in front of me. "These are my retainers. They are all powerful demons. Pick whomever you want. You don't need to defeat them—you simply have to last ten minutes, then I shall accept you as a comrade."

I swept my Eyes across the demons. "Hmm. So you're testing me on weaklings first."

Zercean frowned. "Pardon me?"

"I shall take on all six at once. It won't even serve as a warm-up for me."

"Do you know what you're saying, boy?"

One of the soldiers stepped forward, glowering at me. "We are proud of serving the Angart family and will not overlook such an insult."

Another soldier stepped forward. He appeared just as annoyed as the first. They were Royalists that were willing to reject the Demon King to keep on believing in the sanctity of their blood. Naturally, they had a lot of pride.

“Take it back this instant. We will not show mercy against a child.”

I grinned at them. “That’s the spirit. If you don’t come at me with your all, you’ll die.”

Running out of patience, the soldiers drew their demon swords. “Is this fine with you, Lord Zercean?”

“Do as you see fit, but don’t kill him if he seems useful.”

With Zercean’s permission, the six demons surrounded me.

“You must be able to use storage circles, no? Draw your sword. I’ll fix that arrogant attitude of yours myself.”

Without responding, I shook my hands as though to loosen my wrists.

“What are you up to, brat?”

“You’re mistaken if you think we won’t cut you down if you’re unarmed.”

“Oh, my body’s just a little stiff lately from lack of exercise. I was trying to loosen up a little, but it seems you can’t even let me do that.”

Easily provoked, the soldiers grasped their swords tighter.

“Very well. You’ll regret this!”

One of the soldiers came charging at me. I continued rotating my hands without looking at him. Once my stiffness eased, I stretched them into fans and swirled the air. The whirlwind gradually grew more and more intense, turning into a small tornado before us.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The tornado generated from my wrist blew the charging soldier away.

“What?! Y-You...!”

“How dare you! What have you done?!”

Two more soldiers rushed at me, one from each side. I put my weight on my

right foot and lazily stretched my leg. My magic shifted with my weight, creating a shock wave that knocked down the soldier on my right.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

I then lazily shifted my weight from my right foot to my left, changing the leg I was stretching. The stretch created another shock wave that blew the soldier on the left away.

“GWOOOOOOOOOOOH!”

I linked my hands and stretched my arms upwards. The magic generated flung the rest of the soldiers skyward, launching them towards the ceiling.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

“AGHAGHAGHAAAAH!”

I then relaxed, crossed my arms, and drew a large magic circle.

“AYEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

“ATATATATATATATAT!”

A fierce storm raged in the office. The six soldiers flew about the room like they were being stirred around in liquid. I stretched up towards the ceiling once more, then dropped my shoulders. The soldiers dropped—along with the floor of the room. The entire office fell from the fifth floor to the fourth floor.

“What?! Oh...”

Zercean braced himself against his desk as the floor shook around him. With another stretch up and down, the office was on the third floor. Once more, and it was on the second, then another, and it was on the first. I cracked my neck by tilting my head from the left to right, and the air distorted in response. The soldiers’ bodies were violently yanked in two directions.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“AAAAAAAAAAHAHAH!”

I stretched my right arm out and crossed it over my left. Zercean’s pale face paled even further.

“A-All right, I get it. That’s enough.”

At that, I stopped stretching. The office was in shambles, and the soldiers were on the verge of death.

“As you can see, that wasn’t even a warm-up for me.” I drew a magic circle over the six soldiers and cast Ent. Their wounds healed in no time, and they soon regained consciousness.

Zerceus looked astonished. “It truly was...” he muttered to himself. He looked down in thought for a while, then raised his head as though he’d come to a decision. “I must apologize, comrade Anosh,” he said with a shady smile. “I said I didn’t discriminate based on age, but I underestimated you for being a child. Let us correct the history of demonkind together.”

Zerceus stood up from his chair, walked over, and held out his hand. I accepted the handshake.

“I heard you were good at magic,” he added. “Can you use Nedra?”

Nedra was a spell that transformed animals into monsters. Its use was currently banned in Dilhade, with the exception of some certain conditions.

“Of course.”

“What about Eage?”

“Not a problem.”

“Splendid. It seems luck is finally on our side. You could become the savior of the Royalists, comrade Anosh,” Zerceus said with a sly smile.

Eage was a spell that could control whatever it was cast on. It had little effect on beings with their own will—such as demons and humans—and was mostly used on animals of low intelligence. This was also how familiars were controlled. If he was asking about this along with Nedra, then it sounded as if he wanted me to create a monster and have it be controlled.

However, Nedra and Eage were spells the Angart family should be able to cast without assistance. Had witnessing my power furthered some plan of his to control something out of the ordinary, something a normal demon couldn’t handle?

“Ramon, prepare the carriage.”

“Right away!” Ramon jumped up from where he was cowering and sped out of the office.

“Where are we going?”

“Oh, it’s not far. There’s something I’d like you to see, comrade Anos,” Zerceus said with a heavy look in his eyes.

§ 10. Resistance Hideout

The carriage traveled south out of Midhaze until it reached a wasteland of sand, dirt, and rock. The entire area was well-known for its uninhabitability—the next town was over a day away by carriage.

I stuck my head out of the window and caught sight of the carriage traveling in front. The luxurious black coach was transporting the head of the Angart family, Zercean Angart.

When I looked closely with my Magic Eyes, I could see what was going on inside. Ramon was in there with Zercean along two of his retainers. Of course, that was no coincidence.

I gazed at the passing scenery while listening to their conversation. Eventually, Zercean spoke.

“We may be able to use him.”

“What?” Ramon asked confusedly. He had no idea what Zercean was talking about.

“I’m talking about the boy you brought in. He has terrific talent for such a young age, and him being so young is another benefit to us.”

Zercean ran a hand over his white beard. He seemed confident he could handle a child, no matter how powerful they were.

“I...I thought so too! That’s why I brought him to you, Lord Zercean,” Ramon said, immediately sucking up to his boss. However, it was clear he had no real understanding of Zercean’s intentions.

“There’s one thing I wish to confirm.” Light glinted in Zercean’s Eyes. Particles of magic gathered menacingly at his fingertips. “Is Anosh truly your sworn brother?”

“O-Of course! I’m not the kind of guy to trust someone at the drop of a hat. No matter how strong someone is, there’s no way I’d entrust my back to

someone I haven't gone through years of ups and downs with, ha ha!"

What a pathetic attempt at making himself look better. The silent look Zercean was giving him implied that he wasn't too impressed either.

"Why'd you keep quiet until now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know how desperate we are for talented members right now. Why'd you hide him from us until today?"

"Th-That's..." Ramon quickly racked his brains. He couldn't tell the truth—he'd only met me that day. "That's because he's my sworn brother."

After all his thinking, that was all he could come up with.

"He may be talented at magic, but he's still a child. I can't just throw him in front of the Demon King's Army. I worry about him."

"Hmm. Good point. As we are now, our best bet at facing them is to focus more on assassination and espionage. That is far too much responsibility for a child to handle. Your judgment is sound, Ramon. It seems you're not as dumb as I thought you were."

Ramon blinked in surprise then laughed weakly. "Thanks!" He probably hadn't thought of any of that, but he replied as though he had.

"You're telling the truth, right?" Zercean asked with emphasis.

"Y-Yes. I'm not sure what you're so worried about, Lord Zercean."

Zercean thought for a moment. "Very well. We'll need your assistance with this, so I'll let you in on our plan."

Ramon nodded, grinning. He probably believed this was his chance to go from underling to executive of the organization.

"We'll raise Anosh as the true Demon King of Tyranny and use him to gather even more comrades. Many of the Royalists who left us believed we lacked power and justification. If we obtain those two things, our comrades are sure to return."

"That's amazing, Lord Zercean! It'll let us take the Demon King position back

from that Anos bastard and restore power to the Royalists, right?”

Zerceus looked at him disapprovingly. “I understand your impatience, Ramon, but you must not be hasty. Rushing leads to all sorts of mistakes.”

Ramon gulped nervously. “O-Of course. I know that! I just meant eventually.”

Zerceus sighed and stroked his beard. “What matters most right now is Anosh’s background. With that much power, he could ruin our plans if it turns out he’s actually a spy.”

“Rest assured,” Ramon replied immediately. “I basically raised Anosh with my own two hands. I’ve known him since long before that Anos came into the picture. He adores me, so he’ll obey my every order.”

He seemed to believe he could lie all he wanted, since I, Anosh, would obey his every word. To him, this was the perfect opportunity to improve his position. In fact, if the Royalists used Anosh Polticoal as the true Demon King of Tyranny, Ramon’s power to control the child would effectively make him the new leader.

There was nothing more troublesome than a subordinate who was ambitious yet incompetent. The question was whether Zerceus was able to see that.

“Very well. If today goes to plan, I shall prepare an executive position for you, Ramon. Let us continue fighting together to protect our noble blood.”

“Heh heh! I’m looking forward to it, Lord Zerceus.”

The relationship of trust between them was both fragile and frail. It was hard to imagine them accomplishing anything with a bond like this, but the current Royalists weren’t in a position to ask for more. For an organization that had been forced to dissolve and had lost most of their allies, Anosh Polticoal’s existence was a ray of hope. Zerceus and Ramon smirked gleefully at the new prospects for their future.

Well, they could dream all they wanted for now—until they realized the poison they’d invited along, that is.

Zerceus lost himself in thought for a while. Eventually, the carriage slowed and came to a stop. After opening the door and stepping out from the carriage,

I found myself standing in the middle of nowhere.

“Can you tell what this is, comrade Anosh?” Zerceus asked, gazing at the terrain. I turned my Magic Eyes in the direction of his gaze to see an unnatural hollow beneath the ground. The hollow ran fairly deep, and the magic of multiple demons could be detected along the complicated path.

“Hmm. I didn’t know the Royalists were so good at digging holes.”

“Ha ha ha! True, true.”

Zerceus drew a large magic circle over the earth. Deyas activated, and the ground split apart, revealing a substantial tunnel.

“Surprised, Anosh? This is the hideout of the heroes of justice,” Ramon said smugly, as though showing off a new toy.

“Oh? How interesting.”

Zerceus used Fless to move through the tunnel. I flew after him.

“Is this what you wanted to show me?” I asked.

“It’s part of it. There’s something else here you may find interesting. It’s to do with why we hid our base all the way out here.”

Zerceus descended deeper and deeper into the tunnel. After some time, we reached the lowest level. It was guarded by dozens of fully armored soldiers.

At the center of the cavern was a large hole, which Zerceus walked towards. An enormous green shadow came into view. It had two long, pointed horns and huge eyes that shifted to glare in our direction. Its muscular body was covered in tough metallic scales, and on its back were two enormous wings.

The fierce beast, its body chained down by countless Gijel that were threatening to snap at any moment, was a dragon. Two thousand years ago, they had been on the verge of extinction, so I hadn’t expected the species to survive into this era.

“What do you think, comrade Anosh? Have you ever seen a dragon before?”

“It looks faster than a horse. Can’t we make carriages for these instead?”

Zerceus’s eyes widened; then he chuckled. “That’s reassuring to hear. I asked

you earlier whether you could use Nedra and Eage. This is why. I'd like you to turn this dragon into a monster and control it."

"Can't you do that yourself?" I asked, mostly to check how much he knew about dragons.

"Dragons are highly resistant to magic. They are also particularly resistant to Nedra. We've cast Nedra repeatedly without any signs of success."

"Are you trying to make it into a pet?"

"A pet? Yes, you could say that. Dragons have tremendous combat ability and are known to eat demons and humans. If we can turn it into a monster, its power will increase dramatically, making it impossible for us to handle. The beast may be difficult to control using Eage, but all you need to do is lead it to Midhaze."

What a stupid idea.

"Your plan is to unleash the dragon on Midhaze for the Demon King's Army to deal with."

"Indeed. As of now, we only have one dragon in our ranks, but if we gather ten of them, we'll have the strength to overpower the forces stationed in Midhaze. In the chaos of battle, we'll be able to dramatically reduce the strength of the Demon King's Army. Then our victory will be imminent."

"Won't the civilians be harmed first?"

"That's what's so good about this plan. If the Demon King's Army is preoccupied with protecting civilians, they will be unable to focus on the battle. Of course, all Royalist demons will be informed in advance to evacuate. While the citizens in support of the Demon King of Tyranny aren't all evil, they will receive what they deserve."

How egotistical could a person be?

"Hmm. So I just have to turn it into a monster."

"That's right. Can you do it?"

Zerceus looked at me expectantly. Instead of responding with words, I took a step forward and drew a magic circle over the dragon. It was for Nedra. The

dragon's scales turned from green to black before our very eyes.

"Oooh! How wonderful!"

Zerceus wore a broad grin as he watched the dragon's transformation. He had no idea what his actions would lead to.

"Fools," I muttered.

Zerceus turned to me curiously. "Fools? Is there something wrong?"

"First of all..."

As the Nedra transformation progressed, the dragon grew larger and larger. Its muscles throbbed as though they were boiling under its skin, and the particles of magic being released caused the entire tunnel to shake.

"Oh! The dragon's turning into a monster! With this, we'll be able to..."

With a mix of astonishment and delight, Zerceus gazed at the black dragon. The next moment, something creaked and burst—the Gijiel chaining down the dragon's maw had snapped.

"GROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOARRR!"

Its deafening roar pierced our ears. The other Gijiel restraining the dragon snapped one after another.

"What?! What are you all doing?! Tie it down!" Zerceus yelled frantically at the soldiers.

"W-We're trying to, but—"

"We can't suppress it! It's too powerful!"

"Impossible..." Zerceus stared in astonishment at the dragon. "How could it tear through dozens of Gijiel so easily?"

"You've underestimated the latent power of a dragon, Zerceus. There was no way Gijiel of this level could restrain it once it was turned."

"GWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The dragon let out another roar. The magic that accompanied the ferocious noise paralyzed the soldiers with fear.

“Stand your ground! Stop it from moving—kill it if you must!”

The soldiers drew their demon swords and charged at the dragon. The final Gijiel chaining the monster snapped, setting its huge body free.

“GROOOOOOAH!”

Giant claws swiped at the soldiers, knocking them all down in a single sweep.

“M-Monster!”

Zerceus glared at the dragon, no doubt chewing over a way to obtain its power.

“We have no choice but to retreat. All troops—”

“Secondly...”

I drew a magic circle for Jio Graze and activated it. Like a comet of darkness, the jet-black sun soared towards the dragon, engulfing it and incinerating it with its flames.

The dragon was no more. Only ash remained.

Zerceus’s jaw dropped in his most astonished look of the day. “What?! How... How did you take down that monster in a single blow?”

“Even ten of these monsterized dragons would be no match for the Demon King’s Army. You’ll only be sacrificing the lives of the residents of Midhaze,” I said.

However, Zerceus smirked with glee. “I admit we might have made a slight mistake in our calculations, but it is a happy mistake, comrade Anosh. We now know that the Royalists have gained an ally far stronger than any monsterized dragon.”

“One last thing,” I said.

Zerceus inclined his head in question.

“You have failed to realize a fatal flaw in your plan.”

Zerceus looked as if he had no idea what I was talking about.

“Instead of hurriedly rushing after glory, you should have looked deeper into

my abyss.”

I drew a magic circle over myself. Using Kurst, I manipulated my body into that of a sixteen-year-old.

Zerceus’s eyes widened in shock, as though he couldn’t believe the sight before him. “What? That can’t be,” he barely managed to whisper. Horror and despair filled his face as he stared. He was frozen in place, unable to take his eyes off me. “Why is the Demon King here?”

When I took a slow step forward, Zerceus reflexively backed away. He knelt on the spot and lowered his head, trembling.

“If you’ve forgotten my words at the Demon King Reordination Ceremony, I shall remind you here.”

Zerceus, sweating from head to toe, seemed unable to speak.

“This country will not tolerate malice, Zerceus.”

§ 11. Collared by the Demon King

Zerceus kept his head on the ground as a sign of nonresistance. He was probably desperately racking his brains for a way out of this situation, but it was too late—he had told me all of his wrongdoings.

“Raise your head.”

Zerceus flinched. All he was doing was kneeling, but the ground was damp from the sweat dripping from his pale face.

“Do I need to repeat myself?” I said.

Still trembling, Zerceus lifted his head. He froze under my gaze.

“If you have any excuses, speak now.”

He clenched his jaw, looking vexed, but he soon realized there was nothing he could do and steeled himself for the worst.

“It isn’t possible. The Demon King can’t be here!” He got to his feet and drew a magic circle. “The Demon King of Tyranny cannot possibly exist in this era! The true Demon King died for the sake of peace two thousand years ago. This man is an imposter prepared by the Unitarians! The time has come for us, the descendants of the late Demon King, to protect his honor and bring down the hammer of justice!” Zerceus turned to his subordinates. “Assemble! Assemble, my brothers! Show this heinous misfit the pride of our noble blood! Justice is on our side!”

With a mighty roar, Royalists from all over the hideout came running to the bottom level. There were roughly two hundred of them in total.

“Kill him! Burn him alive!” Zerceus yelled, casting Griad a dozen times in succession. His subordinates followed his lead, casting a rain of flames.

I shot them a glance and sighed. The flames before me disappeared without a trace.

“What? Gah!” A look of shock and horror crossed Zerceus’s face. “He wiped

the fire out with a single breath...”

“Drop your weapons and surrender.” One glance from me left the Royalists frozen in place. “That’s what I would have said, anyway, but it seems you’re all prepared for the consequences of defying me.”

I lifted my right hand and brought my thumb and middle finger together. Magic gathered at my fingertips.

“Prepare your wards!” Zerceus yelled. “Jio Graze incoming!”

Zerceus and his soldiers poured their magic into their defenses, setting up a barrier before them.

“Have a taste of death.”

I snapped my fingers lightly. The magic contained in the sound echoed through the hideout, piercing the demons’ ears and rattling their brains.

“Gah! Aaah!”

“Eeheek!”

“Tsk... Agh!”

With blood streaming from their ears, the demons fell to the ground one after the other. If they were left alone, it would only be a matter of time before they died.

“That can’t be... How could the elites of the Angart house be defeated with a single snap?”

Fear consumed Zerceus, who had barely managed to endure the attack. Ramon and the few soldiers that had been behind him looked similarly terrified.

“I have a question for you: who was responsible for the appearance of that dragon?”

“What do you mean?”

“Two thousand years ago, dragons were a menace that fed on demons and humans alike. My army was charged with their extermination and nearly drove them to extinction. If there are any more survivors, they are far more powerful than any demons of this era. With your Eyes, you wouldn’t even be able to spot

a dragon, much less capture it.”

Zerceus looked flustered. It seemed I’d hit the mark. Someone else had weakened the dragon first.

“There must be a mastermind. Speak.”

“There is no such thing! We discovered the dragon ourselves!”

“Oh really?”

“If you want to kill me, then do it! We Royalists do not fear death. But what kind of king slaughters everyone who disagrees with him? You can’t rule a country like that. Even if you take our lives, you can’t take our noble beliefs!”

“Interesting point. Then let’s do it this way.” I pointed my index finger at him and cast Zecht. “I shall spare the life of the first person who signs this Zecht and speaks the truth. If what Zerceus said just now was true, then all of you should remain silent. If you do, all of you will be spared.”

“Bwa ha ha! You fool. That isn’t even a threat, because *no one* here will sign it.” Zerceus raised his voice at the end as though to caution his subordinates.

Indeed, they would all come out unscathed as long as they remained silent, but nevertheless, a tense air drifted between the soldiers. They avoided eye contact with each other while using the heavy atmosphere to keep each other in check.

If they signed the Zecht, the contract would make them untouchable, but if they remained silent, their safety would only be guaranteed by my word. Of course, I would keep that promise—Zerceus knew that too. But what about his subordinates?

How much could they truly trust Zerceus? How much could they trust their fellow comrades?

The tension in the air grew by the moment. Then someone moved. It was Ramon.

“S-Some strange guy came up to us and offered it! He said he could lend us a dragon if we wanted power. He was wearing a ring I’d never seen before—it wasn’t from Dilhade or Azesion. Lord Zerceus doesn’t know who it was either!

I'm sure of it!"

Ramon rushed forward and signed the Zecht. If he were lying, he would have died on the spot, so it seemed he was telling the truth.

"You imbecile!" Eyes wide, Zercean grabbed Ramon by the throat.

"Ugh! S-Stop!"

"All you had to do was stay silent, you incompetent fool!"

Black flames enveloped Ramon.

"Gaaaaaah!"

He collapsed on the ground then somehow managed to use anti-magic to extinguish Gresde.

"The fool is you, Zercean."

At my words, Zercean spun around and backed away.

"This man may be incompetent," I said, slowly walking forward, "but he wasn't unaware that silence was your best option. He simply feared that someone else would betray you all first. Once the suspicion had been planted, it only made sense to sign the contract. The fastest to move might have been Ramon, but any of the other four would have done so after enough time."

Zercean whirled around to see his soldiers look away, flustered. Their fingertips were glowing with the remnants of the magic they had prepared to sign the Zecht.

"How dare you? You bastards planned on betraying the Angart family..."

"That is why the fool is you. No one would risk their life for the sake of a bloodline. People only risk their lives for other people. You say the Royalists don't fear death, but your fellow Royalists would disagree." I stopped in front of him and handed him the truth. "You're all animals out to line your own pockets. The fact that everyone's concerned only for their own well-being is proof of that."

Zercean clenched his teeth. "This was all your doing," he muttered under his breath. "If you are who you say you are, then you're the one who created us!"

You're the one who left behind a glorious legacy and created the Seven Demon Elders, who brought about all the descendants of your blood! And you did it all for the sake of your own reincarnation!" he yelled. "You call us animals and look down on us, but all this started because of you! If royals didn't exist, then there would be no Royalists! If you hadn't reincarnated, none of this would have happened."

"People like you exist in every era," I said, using my finger to draw a magic circle. "Without royals, there would indeed be no Royalists, but do you expect me to believe you would have been an upstanding citizen instead?" I answered for him before he could respond. "No, you wouldn't have. You're merely using the Royalists as an excuse. What would have happened if Royalists didn't exist in this world? You would have used another excuse instead. You would have found another way to justify how you line your pockets."

No decent person would actively try to harm others in this time of peace.

"People with no pride, conviction, love, or kindness, who merely live as they desire, are no more than dogs." I completed the magic circle and aimed the spell at them. "I should keep those rotten sources of yours on a leash."

"Silence! You speak utter nonsense!"

Zerceus and his soldiers raised their demon swords and charged at me, but before they could swing them down, black threads shot out from the magic circle and coiled around their necks.

"Guh! Ugh... Gah!"

"Nedneliaz."

The coiled threads transformed into cursed collars that constricted their throats.

"Being strangled by Nedneliaz will make you see a dream on repeat—an illusion of your life until today. As long as you continue to choose the path of a Royalist, you will be killed by me at the end every time."

"Gah... Haaah!"

Struggling for breath, Zerceus clawed at his collar.

“The dream repeats one hundred times every second, and the pain experienced within it is indistinguishable from reality.”

The light faded from the Royalists’ eyes, and they began to groan in agony. They had probably died two hundred times in their Nedneliaz dreams already.

“If you choose the correct path, you’ll awaken from your dream, Zerceanus.”

“All right. Hold it right there, Anos.”

I turned to see Ramon smirking proudly. The Gredde Zerceanus had cast had finally faded, leaving the Royalist lackey badly burned in places.

“Heh heh, you seem to be getting quite cocky there,” he said. “Have you forgotten something?”

Ramon drew a magic circle with his right hand, bringing up the Zecht I’d signed.

“You’ve slipped up. You signed a Zecht with me, so you have to obey my every order! Ha ha ha ha! Now, here’s your first order: cast Jio Graze on Midhaze! With your own two hands, engulf the city in a sea of flames!”

Magic flowed through the Zecht. The spell attempted to force me into action.

“So much for peace, huh? Dumbass! Hee ha ha ha ha!”

“You should have used your once-in-a-lifetime chance to order me to die. This is why you’ll always be incompetent.”

“Ha... Ha ha... Huh?” Ramon frowned. “What are you doing? That’s an order. Get on with it!”

“I’ll give you one last chance. If you take back that thoughtless statement, I shall forgive you. Otherwise, I will have to put a collar on you as well.”

Ramon broke into a cold sweat as he watched me. He should have realized something was going on when the Zecht hadn’t been immediately obeyed. He paused for a moment then eventually came to his own conclusion.

“Ha! I’m not falling for that! Now do it! Use Jio Graze! Burn Midhaze down yourself, and show me your pathetic crying face!” Ramon cackled even louder. “Did you think a bluff like that would work against me? There’s obviously

nothing for you to gain from forgiving me. You're just pretending the Zecht isn't working to make me cancel it!"

"Hmm. So you still don't get it," I said, making Ramon flinch. The more time I took to fulfill his order, the more fear filled his eyes.

"What...? Why are you acting so high and mighty? Zecht is absolute! Not even you can defy my orders!"

I took a step forward and drew my right hand back.

"S-Stop! Sto—"

Then I thrust my hand forward and pierced Ramon's throat.

"Ugoh...?"

"Did you think I had to obey the Zecht just because I signed it?"

I turned my Magic Eyes of Destruction to Ramon's magic circle. It immediately shattered, destroying the contract.

Zecht contracts were absolute. However, that was only when both parties were similar in power. The difference in power between Ramon and myself was far too great. On top of that, the spell formula he'd cast was full of holes. The contract was as invalid as any contract that broke the law. It was no more binding than a regular piece of paper and could easily be discarded at no cost.

"However, the Zecht I wrote just now is still valid."

At that, Ramon looked faintly relieved.

"What are you relaxing for? You cannot die. That is the price of betraying your fellow comrades and saving only yourself."

I drew a magic circle over his source, putting a collar around his neck.

"Gah... Ack!"

"Nedneliaz."

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

The moment the collar tightened around his throat, Ramon started writhing on the spot. In his Nedneliaz dream, I was torturing him by shooting Jio Graze at

him as he stood in Midhaze. He would be burned to a crisp by the obsidian flames, die, and then return to the moment before Jio Graze had been fired. He would retain all his memories, but he could never flee in time. During every loop, he could only run around in fear and agony before dying again.

It was only a dream, but to Ramon, it was no different from reality.

“Awaken,” I said, snapping my fingers.

Ramon and Zerceus surfaced with a start.

“Do you understand Nedneliaz now?”

Despite their exhaustion, the pair somehow managed to look at me. In such a small amount of time, they had died several thousand times. It was only natural for them to be mentally drained.

“It’d be a shame to let this hideout go to waste. After all, those who wish to rebel against me will come here.”

Zerceus and the others listened in a daze.

“From now on, your mission will be to reform the minds of all Royalists. Once every last Royalist has been corrected, I will remove those collars.”

“Every last one?” Zerceus muttered weakly.

“Yes. I don’t know how many thousands there are, but you are to find them all and correct them.”

“That’s too much. It can’t be done.”

“If it can’t be done, Nedneliaz will remain with you forever. From now on, that collar will activate and show you those dreams every time you stray from the path of reforming other Royalists.”

Despair filled Zerceus’s and the others’ faces.

“The moment you harbor wicked thoughts, you will be killed by me over and over in your dreams. If you do not choose the correct path, you shall never awaken.”

“H-How... How...” Zerceus clenched his teeth and glared at me. “How arrogant can you be?! You can’t treat people like this...”

“You consider yourself a person, Zercean? You are a dog. If I don’t discipline you with a collar, you may end up biting someone else.”

“Do you think you’re some kind of god?”

As soon as Zercean uttered those words, his hand shot up to grasp his throat in pain. The light disappeared from his eyes, and he began yelling as he dreamed of me killing him.

“God? You people don’t get it at all. And you call yourselves the devout Royalists of the Demon King of Tyranny?” I snapped my fingers, waking him up. “Anything left to say?”

Zercean shook his head, looking exhausted. He fell to his knees and hung his head. Ramon and the other soldiers followed.

“Remember this: this is the way of the Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad.”

§ 12. Looming Threat

After that, I left detailed instructions on the Royalists' activities from now on with Zercean and his cohort. On the surface, they would continue acting as the resistance, whereas in the shadows, they would work towards reforming those who opposed the Demon King of Tyranny. It would be quite the challenge, but they'd brought it on themselves. They had to take responsibility for their actions.

As for the man who'd given them the dragon, it seemed that Zercean didn't know anything about him either. Apparently, he had made contact with them out of the blue and handed them the weakened dragon.

What were they thinking accepting something like that from a total stranger? Well, there was no point in mulling it over now. The man's motives were unclear, but it was quite possible that he would contact Zercean again. For now, we just had to wait and see.

As for the resistance, the matter was settled. I left their hideout and used Gatom to teleport to Delsgade.

"Ah! Welcome back, Anos."

The white view before me cleared to reveal the throne room. Eleonore was grinning at me. Zeshia, who was with her, turned to me happily, but when she spotted me, her face fell.

"It's not Anosh..."

"Sorry about that. I just returned from disciplining some wild dogs."

Eleonore laughed heartily. "Don't mind Zeshia. She just wanted to experience being a big sister for a bit."

"Zeshia practiced lots of magic," Zeshia said with a nod.

"Oh? What kind of magic?"

"It was...mirror magic."

Hmm. So she was trying to work on the specialty magic the Great War Tree had told her about.

“I’ve also been researching support magic,” Eleonore added. “We’ve been practicing in secret every day, hoping to surprise everyone.”

“I take it that’s why you’re in the throne room.”

“Yup. No one comes here when you’re not using it for audiences.”

Indeed, no one would bother visiting the Demon King’s throne room when the Demon King was absent. Not even I normally made appearances there.

“Where are the others?” I asked.

“They went home after we’d had tea at the café. Zeshia and I didn’t have anything else to do, so we came back to the academy. There was a chance you’d come back.”

“Did you need something from me?” I asked, moving to the throne and taking a seat.

“No. I just wanted to see your face—you know, since I’m the Demon King’s magic.”

“There’s no condition like that.”

Eleonore laughed. “It seems that even the all-seeing Demon King can’t see everything,” she said teasingly, pointing her index finger up. “Here’s a question for you. You freed me by making me into your magic, but as a result, there’s something else I’ve been tied to instead. What is it?”

Eleonore was humanoid magic. When I’d replaced her caster with myself, I’d released her from all of the limitations restricting her. Theoretically speaking, she should be free of all ties.

“That’s rather difficult to answer. Is it a trick question?”

“Perhaps. But once you catch on, you’ll realize the answer’s quite simple.”

“Then I’ll give it some thought.”

“No, it’s okay if you don’t know.” Eleonore approached the throne.

“Why?”

“Why do you think?” Giggling, she leaned forward to look me in the eye. She had a bright smile on her face. “The answer is...a secret!”

Hmm. She was in a good mood today. Well, if she was saying I didn’t need to know the answer, then I’d keep my nose out of it. Everyone had a secret or two. That said, since she was bringing it up like this, she probably wanted me to figure it out myself. I wanted to understand my subordinate’s feelings, but I couldn’t tell what she was trying to say. She’d told me she was still tied down, but that wasn’t actually true. It was probably a metaphor for something, but what?

“Eleonore, is the answer something that can lead to a disaster like before?”

Eleonore blinked in surprise then grinned happily. “Nope. As long as you’re alive, I’ll always be your magic.”

“Then it’s fine,” I said, staring into her eyes. “I’ll guess the answer one day. Just wait.”

“Really now?” Eleonore tilted her head teasingly. “Will you be able to?”

I used my Magic Eyes to gaze into her abyss. “Do you think you can hide the truth from me?”

“Pfft! Ha ha, aha ha ha!” Eleonore clutched her stomach with laughter. “You’ll never get the answer if you say that with such a scary face.”

“So my face affects the answer,” I said, taking that to be some kind of hint. “I see. But are you sure? If you speak without thinking, I may end up realizing the answer.”

“Yup.” Eleonore placed her hand on my head and patted me gently. “I like this adorable side of the Demon King.”

It was hard to get mad at words like that.

Zeshia came up to the throne as well. “Zeshia wants to talk too,” she said.

“Oh, sorry, Zeshia. Go on. You can talk to Anos too.”

Zeshia nodded and stood before me. She stared silently at the throne.

“Do you want to sit down?” I asked.

“Zeshia wants to...try being the Demon King.”

“Very well.” I stood up and moved aside to let Zeshia sit. She stared at the throne then looked back at me. “Have a seat.”

Zeshia nodded and sat down.

“Hee hee, it’s Demon King Zeshia!” Eleonore exclaimed as if humoring a child. “All hail!”

“Zeshia...is now Demon King Zeshia.”

“Let’s hear the Demon King’s orders, then.”

Zeshia thought for a moment. “Schoolwork...will be made easier.”

“Wow! Demon King Zeshia’s got her own interests in mind!”

“Breaks...will last for half the month. The other half is for playing.”

“Eek! The Demon King’s a tyrant!”

“Anos...must stay as Anosh forever...so that Zeshia is always the big sister.”

“Oh, I’m in favor of that. What a wonderful law!” Eleonore clapped her hands enthusiastically. Zeshia crossed her arms, looking pleased.

“Did you think...that just because Zeshia is Zeshia...I can’t be the Demon King?!”

What an adorable sight.

“Anos...come sit.” Zeshia patted the spot beside her on the throne. She was small enough that the two of us could sit together. “Sit...please?”

“Sure.”

I sat down beside Zeshia. She smiled in satisfaction.

“Mama, sit too.”

“Hmm, I don’t think that’s possible. There’s no room left for me to sit.”

Zeshia thought for a moment then tapped her knees. “Here.”

“Uh, you’ll be squished if I sit there, Zeshia.”

Zeshia looked disappointed, but after another moment of thought, she

brightened up again. "I have...an idea."

"What is it?"

"If I try hard, I won't be squished," Zeshia said with a serious expression.

Eleonore giggled. "Hmm, I don't think trying hard will help."

Zeshia frowned sadly.

"I know! How about this?" Eleonore turned to me. "Anos, can you turn into Anosh?"

"Hmm." I used Kursla and shrunk my body. In no time at all, I was the six-year-old Anosh. "Will this do?"

"Yup! Thanks. Now, if you'll excuse me." Eleonore put her hands under my arms and lifted me up. She then sat down on the throne and placed me on her lap. "See? Now the three of us can sit!"

"Did you think...that just because it's cramped...three people couldn't sit on it?"

"Yup, that's Demon King Zeshia for you! She'll destroy logic and let three people sit on a single seat!"

Eleonore hugged me as she spoke, petting my head. It tickled.

"Whoa, it feels like I've gained another child."

"Zeshia...is the big sister," Zeshia said, taking my hand. "Zeshia will protect Anosh."

"What a dependable big sister," I said.

Zeshia beamed.



“Thank you, Anos,” Eleonore whispered in my ear. “Thanks for letting the ten thousand Zeshias study at the Great Tree and play with the fairies. Grandpa Ennunen says they’ll all be able to talk soon. It makes me really happy.”

“Oh, this is only the beginning. I said I’d make you all happy.”

Eleonore laughed. “Look at you acting so cool when you’re so tiny. That’s why I love being Anosh,” she said, hugging me tightly. Suddenly, she looked up at the ceiling. “Huh?”

A single falcon flew in through the window high above. It slowly swooped down in front of us.

“Demon King,” the falcon said through Leaks. Its voice was familiar.

“Is that you, Igareth?”

“There’s something you should know. A dragon was spotted in Azesion.”

After the Avos Dilhevia incident, Igareth had become one of my subordinates and devoted himself to maintaining peace. He had returned to his hometown to make use of his experiences two thousand years ago and survey the situation there. His main goal was to investigate human sentiment towards demons and the Demon King, but to think he would report back about a dragon... Considering what had happened with the Royalists, this was probably no coincidence.

“Is this information reliable?”

“I didn’t see the beast with my own eyes, but from the account of its physical appearance and the talk of it returning underground, I believe there’s no doubt.”

Dragons primarily nested underground. When it came to large creatures living beneath the earth, they were the first thing to come to mind.

“Furthermore, several people from the towns close to where the dragon appeared have gone missing.”

“They were eaten.”

“It’s very possible. No one in this era of Azesion knows how to subdue a dragon. The method is recorded in ancient texts, but no one has experienced a

real battle. That applies to me as well."

"Ah, that may be a bit too much for the humans of today to handle," Eleonore said. "Heroes used to use dragon-specific barriers similar to the demon-specific ones, but those are no longer taught in the Hero Academy."

Jerga's top priority had been to destroy demonkind, so he had probably removed irrelevant material from the curriculum. Besides, dragons were believed to have gone extinct.

"How did Azesion react?"

"After receiving the reports from the people, their unconvinced leaders have decided to hold a meeting. I've already reported this to Lord Melheis, but it seems that Azesion has no intention of seeking relief from Dilhade at this point."

They were taking the beasts too lightly. Anything that had lived for two thousand years had to be considerably wise and powerful.

"Hmm. It'd be best to dispatch my followers from two thousand years ago."

"They may be able to exterminate the dragon, but the aftermath could be troublesome. Humans are fussy about procedures and laws, and they've been especially so since the war."

Without any request for assistance, it was illegal for the Demon King's Army to engage in combat on Azesion lands, even if it was to protect the humans themselves. The other side wasn't too happy with Dilhade over the most recent battle either. It wouldn't be odd for those who wanted payback to find fault wherever they could.

"But if we wait for a request for assistance, more people might get eaten!" Eleonore cried. "The Hero Academy's meant to exist for times like this, but they've currently lost most of their strength and authority. There's no one left there who can make these decisions."

She squeezed me worriedly. While the last headmaster, Diego, had been heavily influenced by Jerga's will, he had been reasonably competent when it came to the removal of threats to mankind. Now the only people left were those accustomed to peace.

“The dragon will be a great threat to the people of Dilhade too,” I said to reassure Eleonore and Igareth. Azesion was their hometown—even if the dragon hadn’t harmed Dilhade yet, the matter couldn’t be overlooked.

“Immediately request an educational exchange between the Demon King Academy and Hero Academy. It won’t be a problem if some students just happen to eliminate a dragon they come across by chance.”

If anything, Azesion should be ones guaranteeing the safety of the Demon King Academy’s students.

“They might claim they’re unprepared to host an exchange at this time.”

“It just so happens that a very versatile teacher was transferred over there recently. They won’t be able to say no. You can speak to Melheis for more details.”

“Understood. I’ll continue to gather information on the dragon.”

The falcon took flight and headed back through the window, flying in the direction of Azesion.

§ 13. Lesson on Lost Magic

One week later.

The Conflagration King entered the second lecture hall, humming with a skip in his step. Shin came in behind him and closed the door. Once he had confirmed all the students were seated, the Conflagration King beamed. “Wonderful! You’re all seated!”

He tapped the cane in his hands against the floor.

“Today is the start of the long-awaited educational exchange with the Hero Academy. I’d like to say we’re all set to commence the expedition exam, but I was told this class has already embarked on an expedition to Gairadite.” Eldmed spun his cane and pointed it at the students. “That is why today you will all be learning how to use Gatom to teleport to Gairadite! Everyone, stand up!”

The students stood up with curious looks. One female student raised her hand. “Um, sir, may I ask a question?”

“I like your enthusiasm, Bookworm. Ask away.”

“B-Bookworm? My name is Naya, sir. Do you remember?”

“Of course. Bookworm Naya. You stay back in the library every day to study. Thus I, the Conflagration King, deemed you worthy of the nickname ‘Bookworm.’”

Naya looked at him, bewildered.

“Hey now, don’t make that face. If you don’t like it, I’ll call you ‘Nerd’ instead! Oh, but ‘Geek’ might be good too.”

“Please stick to Bookworm.”

It seemed she’d given up. Eldmed pointed his cane at her again.

“Let’s hear your question.”

“Oh, right. Um, this may be a boring question, but the lost spell Gatom seems

really useful. How was it lost?”

“Bwa ha ha! What a good question, Bookworm Naya!” The Conflagration King tapped his cane on the ground. “The answer is simple: even two thousand years ago, very few people could use Gatom. While the spell doesn’t require much magic, its spell formula is extremely complicated. This is because the formula has to be altered according to the different spaces it connects.”

Eldmed cast his Magic Eyes over the room. “Those formula alterations have to be made up on the spot by staring into the abyss of the space. Only the core of the Gatom formula remains the same every time. That is why the spell was lost.”

There were many spells from two thousand years ago that had to be altered depending on the environment. Gatom was one of the easier ones among them, and the rest had been lost as the people who knew them had died out.

“In other words, as long as you can write a spell formula in alignment with the magic environment of the current time and place, you too will be able to use Gatom.”

Eldmed drew the spell formula for Gatom on the blackboard. It was a formula valid for teleporting to Gairadite at that exact moment.

“Now, attempt it yourselves. This is the spell the Demon King developed to cross distances in an instant. Two thousand years ago, when the Demon King of Tyranny first demonstrated the concept of neutralizing distance, the world was thunderstruck. Experience that wonder and excitement for yourselves!”

The students looked at Eldmed uneasily, apparently fearing what would happen if the spell failed. The Conflagration King pointed his cane at Naya.

“Bookworm Naya, you go first.”

“M-Me? But... You should know this already sir, but out of everyone in class, I’m the worst at using magic. Can I really do it?”

“Stupid, stupid, stupid question, Bookworm! The worst? So what? Stop comparing yourself to the meager sample around you and take a look at those even higher. Just think about it. Compared to the Demon King of Tyranny, even I, the Conflagration King, am no more than an infant. We are all equally puny

before the almighty Demon King!”

Naya stared at him blankly.

“That is why there is no need to look at others. What you should be looking at is magic and its abyss. The only difficult part of Gatom is altering the spell formula—the rest is simple. When compared to other spells, Gatom is no more complex than Grega. There’s no way you can’t do it!”

In reality, Gatom was a little more difficult than Grega, but it should still be just barely within Naya’s reach. Eldmed probably believed that with just a little confidence boost, Naya would be able to do it.

“Do not underestimate the Eyes of the Conflagration King. Now go!”

At Eldmed’s words, Naya squeezed her eyes shut and drew the Gatom spell formula as it was drawn on the blackboard. She then sent her magic into the formula and disappeared.

“Bwa ha ha! Did you see that? It was a success!”

The other students gasped in awe.

“If Naya can do it, we should be fine, right?” someone asked.

“Yeah, let’s give it a go too!”

“This is so exciting!”

Students teleported one after another.

“With this many students here, I feel like at least one of them will end up somewhere else,” Sasha mumbled, casting her own Gatom. Lay and the others were doing the same.

“The Conflagration King will retrieve them,” I said before casting Gatom myself.

The world turned white and then the Hero Academy’s auditorium came into view. The seats on the left side of the auditorium were reserved for the students of the Demon King Academy. The students of the Hero Academy were already seated on the right side. Their scarlet uniforms implied they were members of the former Jerga-Kanon. They all watched with open mouths as the

demon students teleported in one by one.

“What the heck? They can all use lost magic now? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

The one who’d spoken was the redheaded Raos Jilphor, the fire-wielding hero Sasha had defeated at the last inter-academy exam. “Kanon” had been removed from his name after it had been discovered that he wasn’t a true reincarnation.

“Those are the demons that came for the educational exchange last time,” Heine said. Heine Iorg was the blond boy who’d had his holy swords stolen and ego crushed by Lay during the exam.

Ledriano Azeschen pushed his glasses up with his index finger. “So it appears. Just when did they learn such magic? They were no match for us before.” He thought for a moment. “Perhaps this is the power of the Demon King.”

“He’s not here today,” Heine pointed out.

“Of course not. He has no reason to attend school anymore.” Raos spotted Lay and froze. “Hero Kanon... What are you doing here?” he muttered bitterly.

Heine and Ledriano shot glances at Lay before turning silently to face the teacher’s podium. As heroes who had once believed they were the reincarnations of Kanon, they probably felt awkward around Lay. The other heroes were also glancing at the former Hero and whispering among themselves.

“All right, everyone. Silence please! Class is about to begin!”

Clapping her hands, Emilia stepped up to the teacher’s podium. However, the Hero Academy students continued chatting with each other as though they hadn’t heard a thing.

“Are you listening? I said silence please!”

It had only been a few days since Emilia had transferred there. It seemed she had yet to harmonize with the rest of the class.

“Bwa ha ha! It’s good to see students so energetic.”

Eldmed watched the students carefully as he walked towards the podium.

Emilia greeted him with a rather flustered bow, but the students of the Hero Academy continued talking with no sign of quieting down. The Conflagration King continued watching them for a while then pointed his cane at me. “Anosh Polticoal, come forward.”

I got out of my seat and walked up to the podium. The human students could be heard mumbling to each other curiously.

“What? A kid?”

“There’s no way he’s older than six or seven!”

“Is he also a student of the Demon King Academy?”

“Listen up, humans. I can see you have no interest in this educational exchange, so let’s do it like this: Each school will select one student as a representative to compete against the other. If the Hero Academy wins, the exchange will be replaced with a break from all classes. How about it?”

“Th-That would be a problem...”

“Now, now, you’re a demon too, aren’t you?” Eldmed said, dismissing Emilia’s protest. “What are you worried about? There’s no way we’d lose to the likes of mere humans.” He turned back to the students. “As you can see, the Demon King Academy’s representative is Anosh Polticoal. If you can win against him, you’ll be excused from classes for the duration of the exchange. If you lose, you’ll have to attend—but heroes like you wouldn’t be afraid of a child, right?”

The Hero Academy students looked offended at Eldmed’s words.

“You say that, but demons cheat all the time,” Heine said in an impudent tone. “He may be a child, but you’ll just end up picking a challenge you have the advantage in. Why would we wanna do that?”

“In other words, you’re willing to compete in something you have the advantage in. Is that right? Then come up here, human. You can pick the challenge.”

For a brief moment, Heine closed his mouth, looking surprised to have been given the power to decide the contest. Then he smirked. “Well, if you insist.” He stood up with a look of irritation and came up to the podium. “Will you really

cancel classes if I win against him?”

“Of course.”

“It’s a promise.”

Heine looked at me with a fearless smirk. “So here’s what we’re competing in,” he said. “We’re gonna have a game of dice. Whoever rolls the highest number wins. Since demons are strong in both combat and magic, this is the simplest solution, no?”

“Fine with me.”

Heine handed me a wooden die.

“Hmm.”

Its center of gravity was unbalanced. A loaded die, huh? It was made to favor the probability of it landing on one.

“I’ll go first.” Heine rolled his dice. It landed on five. “Nice! Go on. Now you have to roll a six.”

I stared into the abyss of his die to see that it had been tampered with to make it land on five more often. It seemed he’d planned on avoiding suspicion by steering clear of six. If he was already going to cheat, he should have just gone with the highest number to begin with.

“Just to confirm, can I throw the die however I want?”

“Huh? Sure, go ahead. No matter how you roll, the result’s a matter of luck.” Heine smiled as he spoke, emphasizing the end of the sentence.

“Hmm. Very well. Sure, these are wooden dice, but you made a mistake in choosing somewhere with such soft flooring.”

“What are you on about—”

A thunderous noise sounded from the stone podium. I’d hurled the die so hard downwards, it was embedded in the floor.

“What the... WHAAAT?!”

The six was stuck face up, exactly as I’d aimed. By throwing the soft wood at grout in the stone flooring, the die had gotten wedged in the stone.

“Hmm. Looks like it’s my victory.”

Using one’s geographical advantage to control how a die landed had been a common technique two thousand years ago. Because of this, it was common sense to play dice games on a floor that couldn’t be pierced. Then there were still several other methods of achieving a desired roll.

Heine had called dice rolling a matter of luck. It sounded like dice techniques had deteriorated just like magic. Two thousand years ago, dice-rolling contests had been all about how long one could continue achieving the desired roll. Because of that, it had been pretty common to use a thousand dice at once. With a thousand dice, at least one was bound to miss the mark.

Unless I was the one rolling, of course.

“Hold on a minute. That way of rolling can’t be allowed! It’s cheating! Roll again!”

“You’re the one who said I could roll any way I wanted.”

“That’s...” Heine looked down in vexation.

“Well, it’s not like the result will change either way.” I picked up my die and threw it once more. The die rolled and stopped on six.

“What?! Why?! It shouldn’t land on anything but one—” Heine gasped, realizing his mistake.

“You’ve got a long way to go if you’re still relying on tools. You need to study the art of dice more. No amount of weight can guarantee it will always land on a certain number. Look into the abyss of the die, read the environment of the floor and air, and then adjust your strength accordingly. That is how you get the number you want.”

I picked up the die and rolled again. It landed on six. I continued rolling in demonstration, hitting six every time as easy as breathing. Heine watched on in amazement.

“There is no way I would ever miss a roll I aimed for.”

§ 14. Dragon-Slaying Order

Eldmed's laughter echoed throughout the auditorium. "It might have been a mere dice game, yet this is what a dice game should be. Behold Anosh Polticoal, the child genius of the Demon King Academy!"

Heine stood to the side and hung his head in shame. The Conflagration King tried to peer at his face as he continued speaking.

"If you're dissatisfied, you may challenge him as many times as you wish, weak human. In exchange, I will increase the number of lectures the Hero Academy must attend by ten percent each time you lose. I, the Conflagration King, will personally instruct your feeble minds! How about it?"

Heine gritted his teeth and turned away from him. "Of course you demons would use dirty tricks like sending a monster that looks like a child. This is just like how you lied about the Demon King being a misfit. Who'd want to deal with that?"

With a wave of his hand, Heine stepped down from the podium, but instead of returning to his seat, he headed for the door.

"H-Hold on, Heine! Where do you think you're going? We're still in the middle of class!" Emilia called in panic.

He glared at her. "Shut up, Emilia."

"That's Ms. Emilia to you! Treat your teachers with respect!"

"Ha. Teacher? A demon like you? Don't make me laugh." Heine shrugged and reached for the door.

"Hold it right there, Heine!"

"Ugh, you're so annoying. I'm just going to the restroom."

"When you said that the other day, you didn't return."

Heine sighed heavily. "I had a stomachache the other day. For the whole day. If you're that concerned, you can come supervise me. We can go to the

restroom together, Emilia.”

Heine laughed mockingly as Emilia frowned in humiliation.

“Good idea,” Eldmed suddenly declared, walking forward and breaking through the heavy atmosphere. “Let’s go. I, the Conflagration King, shall join you in going to the restroom!”

“What the—”

“Unless...” Eldmed pointed his cane at Heine and asked politely, “Is it a number two?”

Heine glared at the pompous Conflagration King as though he were looking at something foul. When he remained where he was, Eldmed walked up to him and placed his hand on his shoulder.

“Well? What are we waiting for?”

Heine jumped away from him. “I was just kidding! It was obviously just a joke. Going to the restroom before class is common sense, jeez.”

He dodged Eldmed and dashed back to his seat as if he’d sensed he was in danger.

“Bwa ha ha! I thought that was the case, measly human. Bluffing yourself to an advantage is a fine skill. I look forward to your next delightful lie. Go on—just try to outsmart the Conflagration King!” Eldmed marched back to the teacher’s podium, his footsteps echoing throughout the auditorium. “Ah. You may return to your seat now, Anosh.”

I stepped down from the podium and leisurely returned to my seat. The students of the Hero Academy were muttering to themselves about “the child genius of the Demon King Academy” and “what kind of monsters the demons might have hidden besides the Demon King.” But there was one strange voice among them.

“Can the almighty one create a sword that no one can draw?”

It was a quiet question directed at no one in particular. Actually, no. If I had to take a guess, it was probably directed at me.

I stopped and turned in the direction of the voice. A small girl was sitting in

one of the auditorium seats. She had gold eyes, and her silver hair was cut into a bob. Her complexion was so pale, it gave her the impression of translucency. Her pure and elegant appearance was almost magical in itself and created a strange space within the room.

The strangest thing about her was the clothing she wore. The garments were from neither Azesion nor Dilhade. Someone wearing neither school's uniform had walked into the auditorium and taken a seat without anyone questioning it. That sight was extremely peculiar.

"If the almighty one cannot create a sword no one can draw, then he is not almighty," she said. "If the almighty one can create a sword no one can draw, then the almighty one cannot draw that sword either. One who cannot draw a sword cannot be almighty. Is there no almighty one in this world?"

Her presence was peculiar, and so was her question. However, she was most certainly speaking to me. The translucent girl was staring straight at me as she spoke.

"Tell me when you find the answer."

With those words, the foreign girl disappeared. The seat she'd been in was left empty.

"Anosh," Misha called, "is something wrong?"

"Did you see someone sitting there?" I asked.

She blinked at me and then shook her head. "No one was there."

Hmm. So I was the only one who'd seen her. The image must have been projected directly into my head, but that didn't make sense. "Can the almighty one create a sword that no one can draw," was it? I didn't know who she was, but she sure asked odd questions. It didn't seem like a particularly meaningful question to ask either. It wasn't like the answer would affect anything.

Well, if she had business with me, she'd probably appear again someday.

"Then it's fine," I said to Misha, taking a seat beside her.

"Now, back to the exchange—" Emilia said, but just then, the door to the auditorium opened. A man in red robes stepped inside. He had short hair with a

bald patch at the top, and his frame was far from slender—his robes, which normally hung loose on the body, were threatening to burst at the seams. The balding man walked right up to the teacher’s podium.

“Headmaster Zamira... What brings you here today?” Emilia asked.

Zamira answered with a sour look. “The royal palace has issued a decree for Arclanisca.”

Emilia frowned, sensing trouble. “What does it involve?”

“I was just about to explain, if you would keep your mouth shut long enough to let me speak,” Zamira snapped.

An irritated look flashed across Emilia’s face, but she nodded. Zamira glanced at Shin and Eldmed on the podium before turning to the students.

“The royal palace has issued a decree for the students of the selective class. Listen closely.” He cleared his throat. “As I’m sure you’ve all heard already, monstrous creatures called dragons have been spotted across Azesion. Thanks to the palace’s independent investigation, it was discovered that these dragons feed on humans. At this rate, the towns and people of Azesion will be in danger.”

The “independent investigation” had probably been informed by the information Igareth leaked to them. It was hard to imagine humans of this era so quickly grasping the biology of dragons.

“The decree has been issued directly for the Hero Academy Arclanisca’s selective class. You will be entrusted with subjugating the dragons across Azesion. The royal palace has high hopes for all of you. They believe you will succeed without fail. Do not let them down.”

Dilhade had repeatedly warned them of the threat of dragons, so the fact that they were entrusting the extermination to a bunch of students was unsettling. The heroes who’d lost the trust of the people would be of no help right now. Their trump card, Aske, was powerless in their current situation. I had been planning on using the educational exchange as an excuse to quietly hunt down all the dragons, but it seemed like things were moving in a new direction.

“That is all.”

As Zamira moved to step down from the podium, Emilia called out to him. “Um, Headmaster Zamira, shouldn’t subjugating the dragons be under the jurisdiction of the Azesion army? The palace soldiers came to the school not so long ago...”

“Those soldiers were here regarding other matters. The palace has entrusted this task to Arclanisca. This is a trial that they must clear for themselves.”

“Huh? Please wait a moment. Are you asking *students* to hunt those monsters?!”

The headmaster shot Emilia a cold look. “I believe you only transferred here recently, Ms. Emilia. We do things differently to the Demon King Academy. A hero is a hero even if they are a student. It is Arclanisca’s duty to serve the people.”

“But taking on an unknown creature like that is insanity...”

“Ms. Emilia!” Zamira glared at Emilia. “I hope you are not implying that the palace has gone insane. You’d better watch your tongue.”

“No. That’s not what I intended. But wouldn’t it be better to ask for the army’s support just in case?”

“Unfortunately, I am busy. I will leave the rest to you. If you need more details, ask the administration staff.”

“What? Hey, wait a minute. I’m not done talking...”

Ignoring Emilia’s protests, Zamira stepped down from the podium. From there, he headed for Lay’s seat. His surly expression immediately changed into a beaming smile. His chubby body bent over in the most elegant bow he could muster.

“Greetings, Hero Kanon. I am Zamira Engelo, the headmaster of this academy. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

The unamused gazes of the Hero Academy students focused on him, but Zamira continued without a care.

“We humans have long awaited your reincarnation. The royal palace has prepared a grand ceremony to welcome you. Every citizen, every soldier, wishes

to celebrate your return. Would you accompany me to the castle?”

The expressionless look on Lay’s face was rare for him. His annoyance was clear in his body language. “I’m a demon now,” he said.

“No, no, don’t be silly. Only the great Hero Kanon could have seized control of the power of the demons as well. No matter what anyone says, you are a hero. The Sword of Three Races proves that. Even a human has no right to claim themselves a hero if they cannot draw Evansmana.”

Someone on the Hero Academy side of the auditorium clicked their tongue. It was Raos.

“Now, come along. Everything is ready and waiting. There’s nothing you can learn by remaining here on educational exchange with all these fake heroes. How about relaxing in the royal palace instead? As a guest of honor, you will be welcomed with the finest reception.”

Considering his disdain for the Hero Academy, Zamira had probably been temporarily dispatched from the royal palace itself. After Diego’s disappearance, no one would have made themselves available to take over an academy that had lost its prestige. Zamira would always prioritize royal decree over the education of the students. That, paired with his own ignorance, was why he was able to make reckless orders without batting an eyelid.

“I can’t listen to this,” Ledriano said, standing up. “We may not be reincarnations of Kanon, but the headmaster of the Hero Academy shouldn’t be calling his own students fakes.”

Raos also stood up to glare at Zamira. “Damn right. You big shots love looking down on people, huh?”

“What’s with those soldiers out front anyway?” Heine added. “Are they just here to escort Hero Kanon to the palace? You’re willing to set aside so many soldiers for your fancy ceremony and to parade at the palace, but you want to make us students fight the monsters. Are you an idiot?” He scoffed openly, directing his anger at Zamira. “You know it’s impossible, don’t you? You should be asking that real hero over there to do it. After all, unlike us, *he* can use the Sword of Three Races.”

The students of the Hero Academy raised their voices in agreement.

Zamira whirled around and yelled back at them. “Know your places, scum! You have no right to complain! The royal palace should have executed you all for falsely claiming to be Hero Kanon!”

Ledriano pushed his glasses up with his index finger. “We were told that by the Hero Academy. Don’t you think it’s inappropriate to hold us accountable?”

“Then why did you pretend to be Kanon? If the academy was wrong, you should have said so.”

“Were you not informed of the influence of Aske?”

“Fools. The royal palace isn’t about to accept everything Dilhade says. They have their own agenda. There were no side effects to Aske. That is Azesion’s view on the subject. After all, no proof of such a thing was ever discovered.”

Ledriano fell silent. Back when Jerga had been destroyed, the Hero’s mind had vanished from Aske. There was no proof left to discover. The royal palace was now using that to claim that Aske never had any side effects in the first place. Instead of Jerga affecting the minds of mankind as a whole, they were making it a problem on the individual level. That way, they could discard the problem the moment it became inconvenient for them.

“Even if you aren’t Kanon, true heroes should have been able to stop that ridiculous war. If you weren’t fakes, that is.”

Ledriano gritted his teeth. His face was flooded with vexation.

“The royal palace is generously giving you this chance. Do you understand that? This is your chance to slay the dragons and again claim yourselves to be true heroes. That’s something worth risking your lives for, no? Instead of complaining, you should be expressing your gratitude. Know your place!”

The students of the selective class had no choice but to fall silent. They had all been treated as heroes up until the war against demons had broken out. The fact that they were no longer heroes hurt them more deeply than any outrageous insult.

But one teacher didn’t care about such things.

“You keep spouting the word ‘hero,’ but what’s the big deal with that? Why do we have to risk our lives over such a worthless honor? Are you out of your mind?”

As the teacher of the class, Emilia would be risking her life as well if her students were in danger. For someone who didn’t care about the pride of a hero, Zamira’s order was impossible to accept, and she had lashed out at the injustice of the situation.

Zamira sighed. “This is what it means to be a hero. As long as they wish to refer to themselves as such, they cannot disregard their duty.”

“Then they don’t need to be called heroes.”

“What?” Zamira looked at her blankly. He hadn’t expected those words.

“Everything ends when we die. How does risking their lives over a farce like this make them heroes? If that’s the case, then heroes are worthless. Call the army here already. Do you think Dilhade will just stand by and watch you treat students like this?”

Zamira sighed again in exasperation. “Ms. Emilia, you should have studied heroes more before becoming a teacher at the Hero Academy. With views like that, it’s no wonder none of your students listen to you.”

“That’s because they aren’t diligent! It has nothing to do with ridiculous titles!”

Zamira furrowed his brow. “What a waste of time.” He one-sidedly ended the conversation and turned his attention back to Lay. “My apologies for the disgraceful sight, Hero Kanon. If you insist on attending class, we will arrange for a banquet to be held after school instead. We can discuss the details of the ceremony then.”

“Oh, that’s right, Lay,” I said. Zamira glared at me hatefully. “Do you want to play in the water after school? There’s a pretty big lake around here.”

Zamira exhaled heavily through his nose. Although his irritation was clear, he seemed to realize I knew Lay and put on a fake smile. “Ah... Little boy? Unfortunately Hero Kanon has important matters to—”

“I like the sound of that.”

“WHAT?” Zamira choked on his words.

What a stupid-looking face.

“Sorry, but I’ll be turning down the banquet.”

“But why? Please reconsider. I’ll arrange for anything you wish to be prepared.”

With a refreshing smile, Lay replied, “I’m going to play in the water after school.”

§ 15. Delinquents of the Hero Academy

Zamira looked at Lay awkwardly. “I shall visit you again later,” he said, unable to think of any other way to win him over. He then turned to leave the auditorium.

Emilia stepped down from the teacher’s podium and grabbed Zamira by the shoulder to stop him. “Headmaster Zamira, please wait. I’m not finished yet. These delinquents aren’t capable of slaying a dragon!”

“Ugh, why does a mere teacher have so much to say about this?” Zamira snapped. “I don’t have time for this. The king has requested that I escort Hero Kanon to him.”

Emilia furrowed her brow. “Who cares about Hero Kanon? This is absurd! I’m not going to die over some ridiculous order!”

The students of the Hero Academy watched her, their mouths wide open, shocked by her utter lack of respect. She might have been a demon, but she was still a member of staff.

“What did you just say?” Zamira snarled. “You may be a guest here, but that doesn’t give you the right to get cocky. Ridiculous? How dare you be so rude towards Hero Kanon? This is a royal decree!”

“What are you getting worked up for? As I’ve been trying to tell you, that’s not important right now. A lesson that risks the lives of students is—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Zamira’s fist flew at her, knocking her to the ground. “Is this the etiquette of the Demon King Academy? To criticize the king and hero of a foreign nation?! The audacity!”

To humans, Hero Kanon was more than just a hero, but to Emilia, he was the same as all the rest. She pushed herself up from the floor and glared at Zamira.

“We accepted your transfer here as a courtesy to the Demon King of Tyranny,” he said, “but if you continue to step out of line, we will not hesitate to send you back.”

Emilia fell silent. If she was sent back to Dilhade, she would no longer be capable of obtaining the position she wanted.

“My apologies,” she murmured, staring down at the floor to hide her displeasure.

“Watch your mouth from now on. A class consisting of fake heroes and a worthless teacher... This academy is done for.”

With those words, Zamira made to leave the classroom, but on his way back to the door, a student stuck out their foot to trip him.

“Ugh!”

Zamira slammed face-first into the floor. Impeded by his excess fat, he squirmed and flailed for a long minute before finally getting up and glaring at the student.

Ledriano pushed up his glasses. “Oh, excuse me. My legs are rather long, you see.”

“You... Don’t think you can get away with this!”

“All right.”

Raos walked over and lifted Zamira up.

“What? Hey! What are you doing?! Put me down, you disrespectful—”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m on it already. Get out of here. You’re disturbing the class, baldie.”

Using all his strength, Raos launched Zamira at the doorway. He landed heavily and skidded across the floor, crashing into the door.

“Grrr... How *dare* you?” Zamira struggled to his feet once more then glared sharply at Raos. “Do you know what happens when you resort to this kind of violence?”

“Oh? How about you enlighten me?”

A blade with a deep green glow was thrust at Zamira’s throat. It was Zere, the Sword of Sacred Land.

“Eek! Y-You—”

“What? I didn’t touch a hair on that greasy head of yours. Did I?” Heine said with a smirk.

“Y-You’ll regret this!”

With those parting words, Zamira fled the auditorium. Heine burst into laughter. “Aha ha ha! What was that? Was he quoting some petty villain?”

The students of the Hero Academy giggled along.

“Are you okay?” Ledriano asked, offering his hand to Emilia, who was still on the floor. She stared up at him in a daze. He smiled faintly.

The next moment, the sound of a slap echoed through the room. Emilia had struck Ledriano on the cheek. “What were you thinking?! Don’t go causing trouble for others just because you’ve given up! Here I was enduring everything, yet you jumped in and ruined it!”

“Shouldn’t you be thanking us?”

“Are you stupid? As a teacher, I’m responsible for the actions of my students. Now I have to go crawling back to butter him up again. Do you understand that? Do you have some kind of grudge against me?!”

Ledriano withdrew his hand and fixed his glasses, which had been knocked askew. He looked at her through his lenses. “I beg your pardon.”

He turned around and headed for the door, passing by his seat.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going? We’re still in the middle of class!”

“This troublesome student is going to remove himself so as not to cause further problems. I’m doing exactly as you wished, Emilia.”

“Ha. Good grief. I can’t do this,” Raos muttered.

Heine took one look at Emilia, then stored Zere in a magic circle. “You really are a loser, Emilia, not that delinquents like us have a right to speak.”

“Wait right there! Ledriano? Raos? Heine?”

The trio ignored Emilia’s cries and left the auditorium.

“Bwa ha ha!” Eldmed laughed, completely unaffected. He immediately moved on without a care. “The Hero Academy is truly in an unruly state, isn’t it? That

said, this mission to defeat the dragons is rather intriguing. Let us focus our exchange classes on that topic. What do you think, Ms. Emilia? At this rate, the palace soldiers will only make a move once they realize the Hero Academy students cannot handle it, but if you wait, every student here will die. Wouldn't it be better to learn how to defeat the beasts?"

Emilia looked troubled by Eldmed's question. "That may be true, but I don't know the first thing about dragons."

"Bwa ha ha! Leave that to the Demon King Academy. Two thousand years ago, Mr. Shin over there eliminated over ten thousand ancient dragons by order of the Demon King of Tyranny. He's practically a dragon-slaying specialist. Under his instruction, you'll all be able to take down a dragon or two in ten days' time!"

Emilia looked at Shin in surprise.

"How about it, Mr. Shin? Do you have any tips on defeating dragons? What are their weaknesses?"

"Let's see." Shin turned to the blackboard and used his magic to draw a diagram of a dragon. "Dragons are covered in hard scales, but there is an opening on their necks. Beheading them by inserting your blade into that opening is the fastest way to defeat them. Due to their size, their necks are thicker than the length of the average sword, but slicing through half of it is enough to kill them."

"And there you have it. It's simple once you know their weaknesses, no? Bwa ha ha!"

As Shin and Eldmed explained, the students began to look more confident in themselves. Relief filled the air. It was more reassuring for them to have their teachers accompanying them on the mission than to be backed up by human soldiers.

"Say, the thought just occurred to me, but if Shin goes out of his way to avoid the scales, how hard are they really?" Sasha murmured beside me.

"The scales of a dragon are on another level," Lay replied, "but I don't think Shin would have any trouble cutting them. He probably just avoids it because

he doesn't want to blunt his blades."

"There's no way I wanna run into a monster that makes Shin choose where to cut it."

Misa laughed awkwardly. "We might be able to handle them, but Mr. Eldmed's trying to make it sound like it's no big deal."

Eleonore nodded. "He says we'll be able to take on a dragon in ten days like it'll be easy, but those ten days are gonna be awful."

"Don't worry," I said, trying to reassure them. "If you die, you'll be revived with Ingall."

"Tough," Misha murmured.

"It won't just be tough. It'll be a nightmare," Sasha said with a sigh.

"Well, whatever you do—and I believe the Conflagration King will touch upon this soon—make sure you don't get eaten."

"I wasn't planning on it, but why that specifically?" Sasha asked warily.

"Dragons have special digestive organs. They'll gulp down you and your source whole. Once they've digested you, resurrection will no longer be possible."

"Great." Sasha held her head in her hands.

"Um, Mr. Eldmed..." Emilia said, pausing on her way to the podium. "Can I ask you to take over the class from here? I'd like to call those delinquent students back."

"Bwa ha ha! Go ahead. I don't mind. How considerate of you to think of your students! The three who left may die by the dragons if they don't learn. It's only natural to be concerned."

"That's not it. If the students die, it'll be my responsibility as their teacher."

Eldmed laughed again. "Those who act to protect themselves are better than those who do not. Go, Ms. Emilia."

With a bow, Emilia left the auditorium.

"Hmm, will they actually come back?" Eleonore wondered worriedly.

“Ledo... Rao... Hei... Rebellious,” Zeshia added.

“That aside, Ms. Emilia hasn’t adapted to the Hero Academy at all. Why did you transfer her here? She came to you for salvation, didn’t she?” Sasha asked me.

“I thought I’d give her a taste of injustice.”

“Are you evil?!”

“It’s a bit of a drastic healing method, but she needs this to realize things. Treating her with kindness won’t save her from anything.”

Sasha hummed in thought.

“Don’t worry. If it doesn’t work, I’ll prepare another form of salvation.”

I laughed a Demon King-like laugh, making Sasha look slightly disgusted.

§ 16. The Can That Won't Open

Morning classes ended, marking the start of lunch break. We set off walking around the streets of Gairadite in search of a place to eat. Restaurants lined both sides of the road, sending a variety of mouthwatering scents wafting through the air. The lunchtime rush meant every store was packed with customers.

"If there's one thing you have to try in Gairadite, it's the famous roasted hero," Eleonore explained as she led the way. "It was out of season last time you were here, but there are plenty of stores serving it now."

"Roasted hero... What an awful name," Sasha muttered.

Beside her, Misha tilted her head. "What gets roasted?"

"The meat...of heroes," Zeshia answered, clenching her fists with a somber look.

Misha blinked in surprise.

"Hee hee. She's just joking," Eleonore said.

"Zeshia likes jokes." Zeshia giggled.

Sasha shot Eleonore an unimpressed look. "She obviously learned it from you, Eleonore."

"So what is it actually?" Misa asked.

"Roasted hero is called that because the ingredients require courage to obtain," Lay replied. "Mountain herbs that can only be obtained from steep cliffs, lotus fruits that only grow in poisonous swamps, et cetera. Two thousand years ago, they used dragon meat, but..."

As one would expect, there was no custom of eating dragon meat in this era. Lay looked at Eleonore questioningly.

"It's all beef now. They hunt beasts called horned terribulls."

“Terribull goes moo,” Zeshia said, imitating the cry of the beast.

“That’s right! Just like that. Oh, here we are. This restaurant serves the best roasted hero in Gairadite!”

Eleonore had come to a stop before a sign that read “Taste of Meat.”

“There’s normally a line to get in, but it’s empty enough today for us to head straight in. Let’s go!”

Everyone funneled into the restaurant after Eleonore. I was about to follow them when the wind carried a familiar voice to my ears.

“Ugh! Why won’t you open?!”

I turned to see Emilia sitting on a boulder in an empty square. She was sending her magic into the can of food in her hand. It was a magic can—a can that could normally be opened using magic, but she appeared to be struggling to do that.

After realizing that her magic was incapable of opening the can, Emilia began hitting it against the boulder she was sitting on. However, the can was much too sturdy for her slender arms to force open.

“Misha,” I called.

Misha stuck her head out of the restaurant door to look back at me.

“Can you order something you think I’d like?” I asked.

She nodded, glanced over at Emilia, and then looked back at me and smiled. “So kind.”

With that, she returned to the restaurant.

Instead of heading inside, I walked over to where Emilia was sitting in the square. She was so busy trying to hit the can open against the boulder that she didn’t even notice me approaching.

“Stupid can! Open already!” she muttered spitefully under her breath.

“Give it here,” I said.

She looked up in surprise. “Oh... Anosh Polticoal, was it?”

“That’s right. That magic can won’t respond to the wavelength of demon magic. That being said, the ruling between wavelengths isn’t particularly strict. You just need to make your magic more humanlike.”

I held out my hand, and Emilia handed me the can. I then grabbed the top of the can and yanked it open by force.

“What happened to disguising our magic?!” Emilia yelped.

“It was faster this way,” I said, handing the opened can back to her.

“Thank you...” Emilia accepted the can and looked down at it. It had salted meat inside.

“Is that all you’re eating?”

“I bought a variety of them.” She drew a magic circle, reached inside, and drew out one can after another. “But I can’t open any of them.”

“Bwa ha ha!”

I sent my magic into the three cans she’d procured, opening the lids. They had fish in oil, brown bread, and baked beans inside respectively.

“Does canned food taste that good? There are restaurants around here.”

“I don’t like noisy places. As long as it’s edible, I don’t care about the taste.”

What an odd person.

“There are stalls too. Why would you go out of your way to eat canned food outside?”

“I ate at the stalls up until yesterday, but interacting with people was an annoyance. That was when I had the brilliant idea of bulk buying a year’s worth of canned food.”

“But you can’t open them.”

Emilia glared at me as though to shut me up, then stabbed her fork into the salted meat and shoved it into her mouth, chewing it angrily.

Hmm. Well, if she didn’t want to talk to people, that was her choice. I turned around without another word.

“Anosh...”

I looked back to see her staring intently at the can of baked beans.

“They said you’re really good at magic,” she mumbled as though she were talking to herself. “You’re good at dice rolls; you have sharp Magic Eyes; you’re really strong; and yet you’re still so young. You truly are a genius.”

“Hmm. I won’t deny it, but it’s something I was born with, so it’s not really something to brag about.”

“I envy you.”

She was unusually honest today. Was it because I was a child?

“Ah...” She lifted her head and looked at me, then averted her gaze in shame.

“That looks good,” I said.

“Huh?”

“The salted meat.”

“Oh.”

Emilia looked at the can she was holding, then hesitantly offered it to me. “Do you want some?”

“If you don’t mind.”

I accepted the can and picked up a piece of salted meat. Then I brought the meat to my mouth and ate it.

“What are you doing? You shouldn’t eat with your hands.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have a fork on me.”

“You’re not a wild animal. Come over here.”

Emilia patted the boulder, and I sat down beside her. She took out a handkerchief and wiped my fingers before handing me her fork. I used it to stab a piece of meat and popped it in my mouth. The meat had a rather briny taste, but that harmonized well with the umami flavor that became more prominent with every chew.

“Children sure have it nice, living with no worries.”

“What do you worry about, Emilia?”

“That’s Ms. Emilia to you,” she said sharply. Then she sighed. “You should really watch your language, Anosh.”

“Why?”

“That manner of speech reminds me of the most hateful man in the world.”

Well, that was as biased a reason as you could get.

Emilia started eating her beans while staring into space. “You’re royalty, right?” she asked.

“So it seems.”

“I used to be a royal once too,” she mumbled with a melancholic look.

“Oh?”

“You may not believe me, but an evil magician turned me into a hybrid. I used to be so proud of myself. I lived happily my whole life, but when that was taken from me, everything changed.”

Munching on my salted meat, I listened to Emilia speak.

“Every person I meet looks down on me. They make light of my words and pay me no attention. I lost my job and was too humiliated to see my own family. I tried to find a new job, but all I’m capable of doing is teaching, and only royals are qualified to work as teachers.”

I reached for the canned bread and stuffed it in my mouth. The morsel was hard and dry, which made it difficult to chew. Granted, it was still more edible than the brick-like bread of two thousand years ago. My teeth wouldn’t lose to this level of hardness, but it wasn’t what I would consider tasty.

“Every day, I was miserable. I would try to work to earn money, but everyone was hostile towards me for being hybrid, so I got into fights all the time. I could only earn a tiny amount of money to feed myself, and I had to live in filth. I lost sight of why I was living, and continuing to breathe every day was all I could do.”

“But you’re a teacher now, right?”

“I suppose.” Emilia looked at the ground. “But none of the happiness has returned.”

No doubt. But if she was willing to say that to a child, I might as well hear her out. She would probably feel better after talking about it.

“Why not?”

“I learned something after coming here,” she said in a glum voice. “Ordinary people with no Magic Eyes see me as a fellow human. But the way they treat their fellow humans is the same as how I was treated by the demons in Dilhade.”

The demons Emilia had thought were looking down on her for being hybrid were actually treating her the same as how ordinary humans treated each other. She must have realized what that meant.

Emilia curled up and mumbled into her knees. “The gazes that I thought were looking down on me were just a projection of how I used to look at hybrids.” She seemed to think that explanation was lacking, because she added more in clarification. “I was the one looking down on myself. I was cowering in fear at the thought of being looked down on, even when no one was doing such a thing. But what can I do about it?! All that tells me is that I was the lowest, ugliest, worst person in existence. Nothing about that has changed.”

Emilia wrapped her arms around herself and made herself even smaller. “You saw it yourself, Anosh. I’m a teacher in name alone. It’s been only days since I came here, yet all the students make fun of me. They won’t even refer to me properly.”

She looked up, tears welling in her eyes. “Now that I think about it, this is probably the curse of that evil magician,” she said bitterly. “I was royalty only in name. I wasn’t even a proper teacher. I was just a powerless fool who always looked down on others simply because I was irritated. I’m different from Mr. Eldmed and Mr. Shin. I’m not a demon worthy of teaching others.” Emilia bit down on her lip and hugged herself tightly. “But even though I know that now, there’s nothing I can do. I don’t know how to become a person worthy of respect.”

“I don’t understand complicated things,” I said.

Emilia looked at me in surprise. "Right."

"But this salted meat is a little too salty."

"Silly. You have to eat it with the bread."

"The bread is dry."

"That's why you use this oil." Emilia took the bread and soaked it in the fish oil. Then she shoved the soaked bread into my mouth with the salted meat.

"How's that?"

"Good. The bread's become soft, and the meat is perfect now."

"Right?" Emilia's expression softened slightly.

"I've learned something today," I said.

"Everyone knows this already."

"But I didn't until now."

For a moment, Emilia froze. She stared at me silently.

"There must be loads of ways of eating a year's worth of canned food."

Emilia chuckled. "If you want to learn more about such silly things, I'll be happy to teach you again anytime."

§ 17. Playing in the Water with the Demon King

The bell rang, signaling the end of classes for the day.

“Oh, it’s over already,” Eldmed said. “Goodness. Fun lessons always go by so quickly.” He spun his cane and stored it in a magic circle. “Tell me, Mr. Shin, are you free after this?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful. Come with me. If we’re going to slay some dragons, we have to find them first. The students aren’t capable of that themselves yet.”

Shin looked over at me.

“Bwa ha ha! It wouldn’t be much of a class if we left it to him.”

“I shall accompany you.”

The two used Gatom and left the auditorium.

“It’s finally over,” Eleonore said, stretching her arms. Zeshia stretched as if to mimic her.

“Studying...slaying...”

“Yep. And now it’s time to play!”

“Wait, were you serious about the water thing?” Sasha asked in surprise.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Lay replied.

Misa grinned. “Right? It’s a hot day, so the weather’s perfect for taking a dip.”

“Besides, if I look like I have nothing to do, Headmaster Zamira will keep bothering me.”

Sasha frowned at the thought of Zamira. “Oh, that’s true.”

“Sounds like fun,” Misha remarked.

Sasha nodded, smiling a little. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

She reached out and took my hand, linking her other hand with Misha's and forming a chain with the others. I then cast Gatom, and our vision turned white. The next moment, we were beside the holy lake. White sand spread out before us, the water beyond it glinting in varying shades of blue. The water's edge was shallow like a beach. Unlike the location used for the last inter-academy exam, this spot was perfect for splashing around in the water.

I was about to head towards the lake when I sensed someone's gaze on me and turned around. A man in scarlet uniform was watching us. It was the uniform of the Hero Academy. The scarlet color meant he was in the selective class.

The man was tall and slender, and his right eye was hidden behind long hair. This wasn't someone I recognized. Class had only just finished, so had he been out here skipping school?

We made eye contact for a brief moment, then he turned away without any particular reaction. Something on his index finger caught the light, catching my attention. It was a ring—an unusual one too. It was made of some kind of animal claw and was adorned with a thin layer of hide.

The gem set in the surface was odd as well. At the center of the clear, black stone was a scarlet source of light that illuminated the entire stone. However, that light remained trapped inside of the stone, giving it a mysterious radiance.

While I wasn't familiar with the other materials, that thin hide wrapped around the ring was dragon skin, wasn't it?

"That's an unusual ring," I said. The man came to a stop. "Where did you get it?"

"It's a traditional craft from my homeland," he said before taking his leave.

A traditional craft, huh? The Royalists had said the man who'd given them their dragon had worn an odd ring as well.

In Dilhade and Azesion, rings were mostly made from metal, wood, and minerals. Rings made of claws and hide weren't unheard of, but they were sold only in an extremely small number of stores and settlements. Dragon skin in particular was near impossible to obtain in this era.

“Something on your mind?” Misha asked, peering at my face.

“It’s fine. He was wearing the uniform of the Hero Academy. I can just ask him the next time we meet.”

“Anosh, Misha, come on! Let’s swim!” Eleonore called, waving at us from where she was standing in the shallows. Misha and I leisurely walked over to join her.

“If I knew we’d be going into the water, I would have packed my swimsuit in my storage circle,” Sasha grumbled. She was crouched by the water’s edge, scooping the water into her palms.

Eleonore looked at her. “Huh? But didn’t you use Koko at the last inter-academy exam? It shouldn’t matter if you swim in your clothes.”

“Swimming isn’t a problem, but it doesn’t feel right. The atmosphere’s all wrong.”

“Hmm. In that case, I’ll arrange the proper atmosphere.”

I held my hand out in front of myself and drew a magic circle over everyone present. The next moment, our clothes disappeared in a burst of light and were replaced with swimsuits.

“Whoa! Swimsuits!” Eleonore cheered by the water’s edge. “Look, Sasha! It’s just what you asked for. Cheer up!” she said, splashing water at Sasha.

“Eek! Hey, Eleonore!”

“Counterattack time...” Zeshia imitated Eleonore by scooping up the water and splashing Eleonore’s face.

“Heh heh heh. You’ve done it now, Zeshia!”

Eleonore and Zeshia continued splashing each other happily.

“Sasha,” Misha said, pointing at her own swimsuit, “does it look good?”

“Uh, it suits you, but don’t you think all our swimsuits are a little too daring?”

The swimsuits Sasha and the other girls were wearing covered far less than the average swimsuit that could be purchased in Dilhade stores. Instead of being all in one piece, these were in two halves.

“Hmm. You don’t get it, Sasha,” I declared, crossing my arms.

“Not that it bothers me, but isn’t your swimsuit a little too snug too, Anosh?”

“A swimsuit isn’t just a piece of clothing; it’s a type of magic that enhances one’s underwater abilities to the maximum.”

“It’s what?!” Sasha yelled.

“In other words, this thin fabric acts as a magic circle that’s constantly activated. This era has forgotten how to use basic magic like this, but the swimsuits you’re wearing have spell formulae optimized for your bodies.”

I showed them the swimsuit I was wearing. A magic circle appeared on the surface, sparkling brightly. “Remember this: it’s called Bik Inni.” I casually stepped towards the lake. “Behold—you can even do this while wearing it.”

I ran across the surface of the water without sinking.

“You’re not going to swim?!” Sasha cried.

“Of course, I can swim as well.”

I sank into the water with a splash and began to swim laps around the holy lake. The current swirled faster and faster until it turned into a whirlpool that swallowed the fish in the lake.

“Come now, Sasha, Misha. This is a rare opportunity. Let’s enjoy it to the fullest.”

“We’ll die!”

“What are you saying? Don’t underestimate the Bik Inni. What kind of swimsuit would be unable to withstand the current or a few waves?”

Sasha and Misha exchanged looks.

“It’ll be okay.”

Misha stepped into the raging whirlpool. The Bik Inni protected her from the current, allowing her to walk through with no issue.

“Come,” she said, offering Sasha her hand.

Sasha took a few hesitant steps onto the water. When she realized the

current wouldn't sweep her feet away, she smiled. "Ha ha! What is this? It's amazing!" She let herself drop into the water. "Eleonore, Zeshia, come join us! It feels great!"

Sasha waved to the pair kneeling by the shore as she swam.

"We'll be there soon! We're going to make a sandcastle first."

Zeshia and Eleonore had started gathering water and sand to make some kind of building. They still had some ways to go before its completion.

"Maybe later, then!" Sasha dived underwater and began swimming after me. Misha joined in by swimming alongside her. "Anosh!"

Just as they were about to reach me, I kicked the water and increased my speed.

"Why are you running away?!"

"Ha ha. I'm playing. Try to catch me."

"Oh, jeez, wait up!"

Sasha and Misha chased after me as I swam all around the whirlpool. The laps we made stirred the current further, turning the whirlpool into a raging tornado.

At the water's edge, Misa watched the huge swirling torrent. "Aha ha... Things have gotten kind of crazy."

"You've got a Bik Inni on, so you'll be fine," Lay said with a smile.

"R-Right, but this swimsuit is a little embarrassing." Misa hugged herself as though to hide her body.

"You look good."

Lay was in a Bik Inni as well. His well-trained body was out for all to see.

"D-Don't look too closely, okay?"

Lay casually averted his eyes. Misa crouched down and scooped some water from the edge of the lake.

"Hyah!" she cried, splashing Lay with the water. "Ha ha ha, you let your guard

down!”

With his usual grin, Lay reached for the water as well. “It looks like someone needs to be punished.”

“Eek! Awaaaah!”

Misa spun around and raced along the shore. Lay slowly chased after her.

“Where are you going, Misa?”

“You’ll splash me if I stop, won’t you?”

“It’s okay.”

“Really?”

“I promise.”

At that, Misa came to a stop. She feigned slowly turning around and then splashed him with more water instead.

“Aha ha! You fell for it again!”

Lay grinned. “Now you’re in for it!”

He splashed Misa back, and she screamed happily before setting off running again. The two continued splashing each other as they darted about in the shallows.

“Wait up, Misa.”

“I’m not waiting! Just try to catch me!”

“You said it first.”

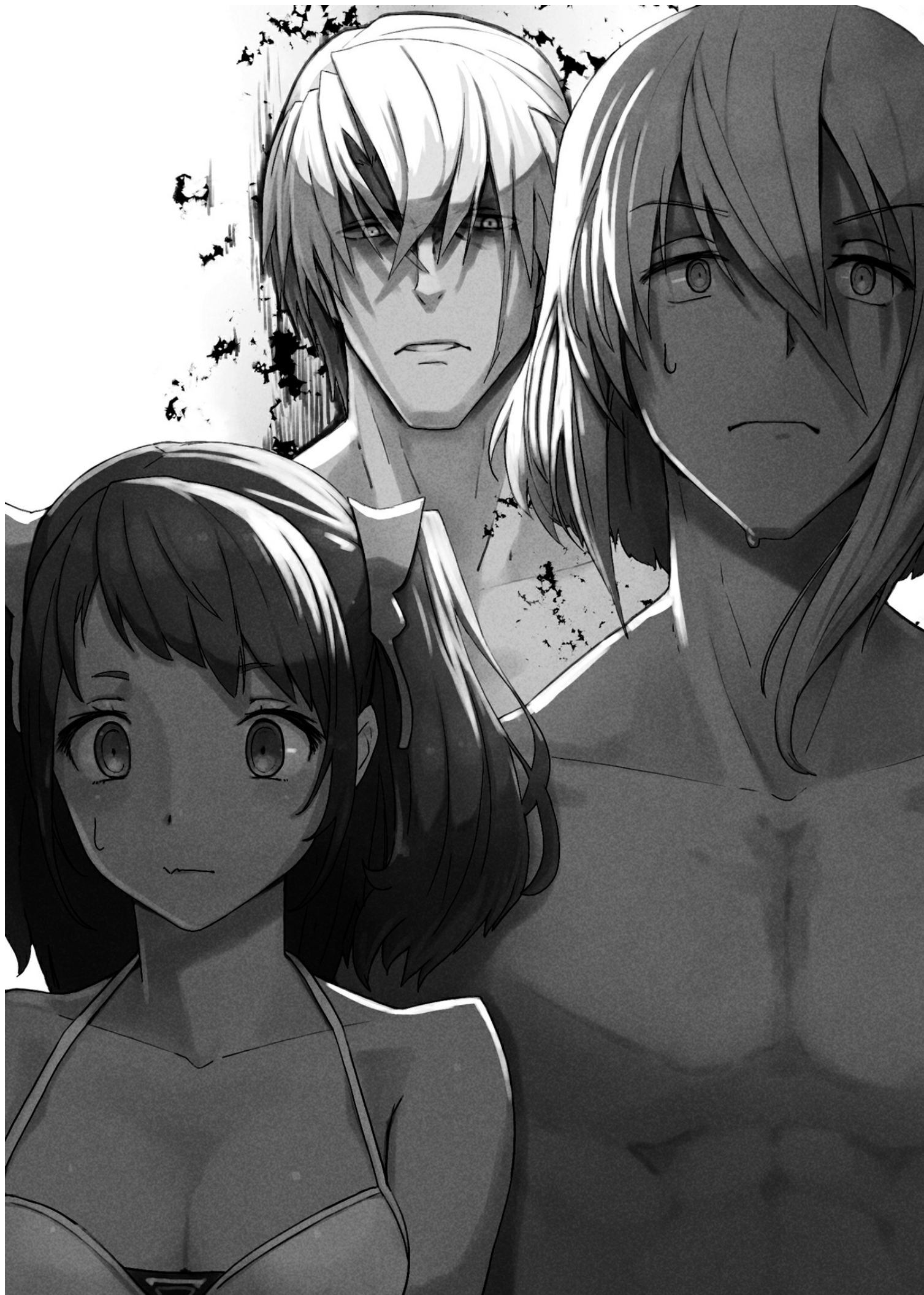
Their delighted laughter echoed from the edge of the lake. Eventually, Lay caught up to Misa and grabbed her hand.

“Ah...”

“There, I caught you.”

Misa’s eyes were drawn to Lay’s as he smiled. Eleonore and Zeshia were distracted with their sandcastle, while Misha, Sasha, and I were making a tornado in the water. Misa and Lay were completely lost in a world of their own.

“What were you going to do after catching her?”



Lay snapped back to his senses and whirled around. Shin was standing behind him dauntingly, dressed in his own Bik Inni.

“F-Father?! Didn’t you go looking for dragons?”

“I had an uneasy feeling. We’d already found several dragons, so I left the rest to Eldmed and returned first.”

“I...I see.”

“Incidentally, Lay Grandsley”—there was a glint in Shin’s cold eyes—“if you can swim from this bank to the adjacent bank and back faster than I, I shall allow you to spend the remaining time here alone with my daughter.”

“What are you saying, father?”

Lay lifted a hand to stop Misa’s protest and smiled. “I may be no match for you with a sword, but I’m pretty confident in my swimming.”

“I look forward to seeing you prove that. I cannot entrust my daughter to someone worse at swimming than I am. A man who cannot conduct a sea rescue in an emergency is worthless.”

Sparks flew as the two glared at each other.

“If you could give the signal, my liege.”

“How amusing.” I leaped out of the tornado and crossed my arms before the two of them. “Race to your hearts’ content!”

At my cue, Shin and Lay started running.

“As you wish, my liege! As the right-hand man of the Demon King, I shall not lose in the water or otherwise!”

“Two thousand years ago, Gairadite was the last hope for mankind. This holy lake was our fortress. With the weak and weary behind me, I couldn’t allow a single demon past me, and so I trained as hard as I could!”

Lay and Shin dived into the water together and took off like arrows, piercing through the tornado as they tore towards the adjacent bank.

“Allow me to demonstrate the stroke of a hero!”

“As you should!”

A lover, and a father. A hero, and the Demon King’s right-hand man. Two men in Bik Inni were underwater in a competition of will and pride, hopes and wishes, and romantic and parental love. It was a battle worthy of the Mythical Era, an underwater contest with everything on the line.

The battle concluded in an instant. The two crossed the vast holy lake in no time at all and returned to the sandy beach. Shin was in the lead on the way back. Lay was exerting the last of his energy in pursuit. They dived into the sand at practically the same moment.

“Hah... Hah...”

“Huff... Phew...”

The two were completely out of breath. Two men who could exchange fierce sword blows without batting an eyelid had used that much of their energy while swimming.

“Who...came first?”

“Misa?”

Lay and Shin looked at Misa. She looked back from where she’d been watching Eleonore and Zeshia. Sure enough, the winner of their battle was...

“Ah. Aha ha... I wasn’t watching.”

The two men in Bik Inni lost the last of their strength and collapsed against the sand. They silently lay beside each other, staring at the sky.

A father with a beloved daughter, and a man with a cherished sweetheart. Both harbored emotions they refused to give up on, but at that moment, they felt the same.

§ 18. Oracle

The sun eventually set, and the shining moon rose in the sky. After playing in the water, we made our way to Dormitory Three of the Hero Academy. Just like last time, we would be staying here during the exchange.

“I swam so much, I’m starving!” Eleonore declared.

“Zeshia will go for seconds...then thirds...and grow lots.”

“Yep! You gotta eat lots to grow big!”

Eleonore and Zeshia continued chatting excitedly as they entered the dorm together, leaving the rest of us to talk outside.

“I’m not hungry at all,” Sasha said, looking thoroughly worn out. Misha watched her with concern.

“Are you feeling sick?” Misa asked.

I chuckled. “Sasha had a little bit *too* much fun in the water. She literally ate the water I splashed at her, so she must be feeling rather bloated.”

Sasha bared her teeth and glared at me. “Who would have expected that much water to come flying?! That wasn’t playing! I thought I was gonna drown!”

“I’m full of water too,” Misha said, rubbing her stomach. She’d swallowed a considerable amount of water as well.

“But you were able to avoid my water gun rather well towards the end. Once you learn how to use Bik Inni, water battles will become a breeze.”

“Say, I was wondering...did everyone use Bik Inni for water battles two thousand years ago?” Sasha asked.

“Is there a problem with that?”

She touched her brow and shook her head. “I’m glad I wasn’t born two thousand years ago, when you had to risk your lives while fighting practically

naked.”

“Oh, not even Bik Inni could provide enough defense back then. People wore armor and robes over the top of it.”

“Thank goodness. A weird image was forming in my head.”

“That being said, Bik Inni loses some of its effect when worn underneath other clothes. During ambushes and surprise attacks that relied on speed, the only armor worn would be the swimsuits.”

“I’m going to pray that never happens in this era,” Sasha mumbled before entering the dorm with Misha.

“Lay,” I called just before he followed them, “I’m going to go for a quick walk.”

Lay glanced at the dark night sky and smiled cheerfully. “I won’t bother you, then.”

I walked past the dorm and continued down a deserted street. After a while, an old, abandoned building came into view. It looked to be a former church, as it was made of stone and multiple pillars. The windows and walls were crumbling, and half the roof had caved in. It was the perfect spot, so I went inside.

Once I’d reached the middle of the ruins, I came to a stop. “This should be discreet enough. How about you show yourself now?”

Footsteps echoed through the room. A man with long hair covering one eye appeared by the entrance. He was dressed in scarlet uniform and wore an unusual ring on his hand.

“Hmm. You were the one watching me at the lake. What do you want?”

The man with the ring glared at me. “So you choose to feign ignorance.”

“Unfortunately, I have no idea what you mean. Who are you?”

Undaunted, the man with the ring replied. “I am Ahid Alover Agartz: cardinal of Jiordal, Kingdom of the Divine Dragon, and Oracle of the Eight.”

Kingdom of the Divine Dragon? I’d never heard of it. It wasn’t on the maps of

the Magical Age, much less the ones from two thousand years ago. I'd never heard of the Eight either.

"Sorry, but it doesn't ring a bell. Ahid, was it? Are you sure you have the right person?"

"The Misfit Anos Voldigoad," he said without hesitation.

Oh? I was currently in my six-year-old form, but he could see my source. He was no ordinary person, and it didn't seem likely that he'd mistaken me for someone else.

"I have received the divine message that you are the king of demons who has been invited to participate in the sacred Selection Trial."

Ahid thrust his right hand out with his ring facing me. "O Selection God, heed my call. Bring upon us judgment as our pact decrees."

Divine light gathered at the gem of his ring. The scarlet stone at the center of the transparent black stone was set alight, its faint glow creating a three-dimensional magic circle within the stone. Layers upon layers of magic circles overlapped inside, swelling with an enormous amount of power.

The atmosphere trembled, rumbling audibly as countless particles of magic rose into the air. The particles gathered before Ahid and formed the shape of a person. A presence of tremendous power was trying to travel across a long distance and materialize here.

Summoning magic, huh? But it was a little different from normal summoning magic. I had never witnessed a spell of this scale, not even two thousand years ago. A humanoid summon was rare as well. What was he calling here?

"Guala Nateh Forteos."

The particles that formed a humanoid shape inverted, summoning someone with great power. She was a beautiful, translucent girl with silver hair and gold eyes—the same foreign-clothed girl that had been in the auditorium of the Hero Academy.

However, unlike back then, her magic was phenomenal. That divine power flowed from her body, and her every breath that made the air tremble proved

she was nothing less than the embodiment of order. There was no doubt about it—she was a god.

“Hmm. I’ve never heard of magic that can summon gods.”

Neither Ahid nor the god he’d summoned said anything and instead stared back at me.

“I’m unfamiliar with this god too. What’s your name?”

The god, who looked like a little girl, quietly opened her mouth. “Arcana.”

“What order are you?”

She stared at me as she replied. “I’m a Selection God.”

A Selection God? So she was the order of selecting something.

“As of this moment, this area is a divine place of judgment,” Ahid said. “Bring out your god, Anos Voldigoad.”

He was making no sense.

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. You are the Misfit, one of the Selected Eight.”

“I assure you I do not. I don’t even recall becoming one of your so-called Selected Eight.”

Despite my words, Ahid remained cautious and kept a close eye on my every move. “Very well. If you don’t wish to reveal your god, you will receive judgment for defiling the Selection Trial. Don’t think you can emerge victorious from this holy war without borrowing the power of a god!” Ahid sent his magic into his ring. “Arcana, my deity, bring your judgment down upon this insolent misfit.”

Arcana solemnly lifted her arms, her palms facing the sky. Magic gathered in her hands, and flowerlike snowflakes began to fall from above.

“Oh?”

They were lunar snowdrops.

I looked up at the sky, which peered back at me through the broken ceiling.

There was something else in the sky, something other than the normal moon—a crescent moon shining with silver light. It was Altiertonoa, the Moon of Creation. I had glimpsed it only as a full moon before now, but this form still held the same power.

“Freeze in the moonlight.”

The falling lunar snowdrops passed through my magic wards and fluttered down onto my body. My limbs froze in no time at all, followed by every other part of me, excluding my face.

“This is your last chance, Misfit. Reveal your god. Otherwise judgment will be passed upon you, and you shall be trapped in unmelting ice for eternity.”

“As I said before, you’re mistaken about something, Ahid. I have no god.”

“Then receive your judgment of death. Farewell, Misfit.”

Arcana pointed at my face. “Summon them already.”

“I have a question for you. Are you Militia?”

The magic at Arcana’s fingertip activated, and the Moon of Creation shone over my head. Through the power of Arcana’s order, my entire body was frozen solid.

“I am Selection God Arcana.”

After a single glance at my frozen form, Ahid turned to leave the ruined church.

“Where are you going, Ahid? Weren’t you going to kill me?”

He whirled around immediately and frowned. A crack had formed in the ice. A magic circle appeared by my feet, expanding in size until the ice shattered with an ear-piercing smash. Shards of ice dissolved into the air. I waved away the cold breeze and used Kurst to grow into my full-sized self. However, his Eyes weren’t focused on me, but were restlessly scanning our surroundings.

“What’s wrong? What are you so feverishly looking for?”

“You sure enjoy asking the obvious. The only thing that can resist the power of a god is another god. The freezing power of the lunar snowdrops could only

have been lifted by the god you summoned.”

Against my will, laughter bubbled up from the pit of my stomach. “Pa ha ha! Only a god can resist the power of a god, you say? Why don’t you try asking that god of yours if that’s true? Did I really borrow the power of a god?”

Ahid directed his gaze towards the girl standing protectively before him. “Arcana, my deity, grant me your divine wisdom.”

She shook her head. “Be careful, Ahid. I don’t sense another god.”

Ahid’s expression stiffened. He looked at me even more warily than before. “A stealth ability that even my deity cannot see past... His summoned god must be of an order related to concealment. How troublesome,” he mumbled.

“Hmm. It seems you haven’t been listening to anything I’ve said. I haven’t the slightest clue what you mean by ‘summoning gods’ or this ‘Selection Trial.’” I slowly stepped towards him as I spoke. “But did you really think one measly god could overpower the Demon King?”

§ 19. The Selection God

Without hesitation, I approached Ahid and Arcana.

“Did you just say one ‘measly’ god?” Ahid asked, his voice laced with anger.

“And if I did?”

“No matter the land or location, every living person in this world worships a deity. We revere, respect, and pray to them. In response, the gods bless us with salvation.”

Arcana stepped in front of Ahid as though to obstruct my path. I came to a stop and addressed him.

“I presume that is the way of your Kingdom of the Divine Dragon, but the people of Dilhade have never worshipped the gods, and there aren’t many people in Azesion who do either. Having faith in the gods is a choice—one that shouldn’t be forced on people and nations that do not desire it.”

“No. Azesion does worship a deity: the one who can draw the Sword of Three Races, the hero who wields Evansmana. Their reverence is much the same as belief in a god.”

“What ridiculous reasoning,” I said, dismissing Ahid’s words. “But setting that aside for the sake of the argument, the god of your kingdom would be that girl, no? She has a different source to Evansmana. It doesn’t change the fact you believe in different gods.”

“Gods are a concept—the concept of eventual salvation. All the gods of this world are the helping hands of the Almighty Radiance, Equis. Both Evansmana and my deity, Arcana, are among the countless agents sent by the Almighty Radiance. Only the shortsighted claim to believe in a different deity.”

“I see. This is your god; that is your god. Everything is an extension of your Almighty Radiance. Is that what you think?” I laughed, making Ahid glare at me sharply. “And? What’s your point?”

“I was wondering what kind of person the Misfit of the Selection Trial would be, but you’re even more insolent than I imagined. The Almighty Radiance will never forgive heretics.” Ahid held his ring out towards Arcana and directed his magic towards her. “This must be why you were invited to the Selection Trial—in order to receive the judgment of the gods.”

Cold air began to radiate from Arcana’s body. The lunar snowdrops falling from the sky increased in number, transforming the ruined church into a mystical snowscape.

“How arrogant you are. I don’t care about this Equis god of yours, and you’re free to follow whatever god you wish. But to say you won’t forgive others...” I took a step towards Arcana. “Who do you think you are?”

“I could ask you the same. Who do you think you are to defy Arcana? The miracle of a god isn’t something that can be blocked twice.”

At Ahid’s words, Arcana quietly clapped her hands together. The lunar snowdrops formed the shape of two giant hands that mimicked her movement, swooping down to crush me between their palms of snow. White flowers scattered into the air from the impact.

Ahid cradled the ring on his right hand and muttered a prayer. “Bring salvation to this pitiful lamb. Free him of his sins.”

“Hmm. That Selection God of yours certainly doesn’t seem easy to defeat,” I said. Ahid whirled around at the sound of my voice, and a moment later, I pierced his heart.

“Gah!”

“But her weakness is right out in the open.” I crushed his heart in my grip, using Vebzud to destroy his source. “Even a god becomes helpless when the one who summoned them disappears.”

When I withdrew my hand, Ahid fell to the ground, but Arcana was unfazed by the removal of her summoner. She quietly raised her palm towards the sky. Rays of blinding moonlight illuminated a humanoid figure in an empty space. Ahid, who had just been destroyed, appeared there.

“Hmm. That’s the miracle of Altiertonoa, the Moon of Creation. The moon is

constantly using its power to recreate your source so that it doesn't perish completely."

The revived Ahid glared at me sharply. "I've seen the truth of your power now. The speed at which you evaded the lunar snowdrops—it's clear you're using Azept. You have summoned your god to possess your body, yet you claim not to worship any god. What insolence."

And now I had a god possessing me, did I? What a load of garbage.

"What a thickheaded man you are. Why is it so hard to understand that I move faster than any god?"

"Such lame excuses won't work on me," Ahid declared. "Successful possession by a powerful god gives a member of the Eight a considerable advantage in the Selection Trial, but at the same time, the vessel won't last for long. In fact, I can predict what you're thinking right now—that the regeneration abilities of the Moon of Creation are greater than you expected. If you don't defeat them quickly, the divine power inside of you will be your end. Am I wrong?"

He was so far off the mark, his spiel was almost embarrassing to listen to.

"At this point, you're just a clown," I said, drawing a magic circle. A jet-black sun emerged from within.

"May you bestow me with your divine protection, my deity."

As Ahid prayed, a wall of snow formed before Jio Graze. Arcana had thrust her hands in front of her to create the barrier.

"The protection of a god is an absolute defense that can repel any magic," Ahid explained. "You'll never— What?!"

The wall Arcana had created dissipated on the spot. I had used the origin spell Jirasd to create a lightning bolt and focused its trajectory on a single point to pierce through it.

"You're looking away."

I moved behind Ahid once again, making to thrust my hand into his abdomen—when Arcana grabbed my arm from the side.

“Oh? It seems you have the strength of a god, at least. But there’s nothing you can do with that baggage in tow.”

I fired a Jio Graze at point-blank range, but Arcana deflected it with her anti-magic. Taking advantage of the opening, I thrust my Vebzud-stained left hand into her chest. She managed to jerk aside to avoid a direct hit to her vitals, but blood seeped from the open wound.

“Run, Ahid,” she said.

Ahid faltered.

“You can’t defeat the Misfit right now. I’ll take care of this.”

“No. I’ll use our trump card.”

“Without harmony, the power of a god will destroy your body. Are your beliefs telling you to perish here?”

Ahid fell silent for a moment, then said, “As you wish, my deity.”

He used Gatom and vanished. Stopping him would have been easy if I wanted to, but it was clear from the way Arcana was glaring that she would intervene if I did.

Well, he wasn’t a threat anyway. Once I dealt with the god, he would be powerless.

“So what now? Did you think you could take me on without your baggage holding you back?”

“I can’t say. You’re strong. In the entire history of the Selection Trial, there’s never been a candidate as strong as you.”

“You keep mentioning the Selection Trial, but what is it exactly?”

Arcana turned her Magic Eyes on me. “You are aware that you are a misfit.”

“Thanks to a certain Heavenly Father calling me that, yes.”

Arcana thought to herself for a moment. It seemed the term I was thinking of had a different meaning to the one she was talking about. Did that mean she didn’t know that the Heavenly Father had been defeated by me? As always, gods had no interest in anything other than their own order.

“Have you ever been to Everastanzetta?” Arcana asked.

“I’ve never even heard of it. What is it?”

“An educational institution dedicated to the study of gods. It’s located in Gaelahesta, the holy capital of the underground world that the three warring kingdoms agreed would be a neutral zone.”

Everything she said was news to me.

“Misfit Anos Voldigoad, if you truly are unaware of anything, then it is my duty as a Selection God to explain things to you.”

Hmm. Was she up to something?

“If you don’t believe me, you can listen while we fight. I will continue explaining regardless.”

Well, whatever. Fighting for one’s life without knowing what was going on felt rather unpleasant. I removed Vebzud from my hands to demonstrate my lack of hostility and turned my back to her. I then walked a few steps to distance myself.

“Let’s hear it.”

“The Selection Trial is a path to godhood,” Arcana said quietly. “A way for the people of this world to become agents of their gods. A Selection God is a god or goddess who chooses their agent. In the trial, the Selected Eight—the eight candidates for becoming the agent—are judged to decide who is most worthy.”

A trial to decide who became their god’s agent, was it? And the Selected Eight were the eight candidates participating.

“The agent then receives power befitting a god,” she concluded.

“But this seems rather turbulent for a trial.”

Arcana nodded. “To become the agent, a candidate must be judged worthy by every Selection God, but in most cases, the candidates form pacts with the gods that selected them. There are barely any Selection Gods willing to deem someone besides their own candidate worthy.”

“So, in short, the Selected Eight will attempt to eliminate each other and their

gods. By becoming the last man standing, they inevitably become chosen as the agent.”

“That is one form of resolution. There are many ways for the trial to reach an end. A holy war isn’t the only form of judgment.”

So she said, but these trials were contests to reach godhood. There would be no peaceful settlement via discussion.

“Why was I chosen as a candidate?”

“Each Selection God decides their candidate. There are eight Selection Gods in the Selection Trial. The Selection God that chose you is meant to explain the trial to you.”

A god had chosen me, huh? It was hard to think they had decent intentions if they’d yet to show themselves.

“I see. And then I’m meant to make a pact with that Selection God so that I can summon them.”

“Some make a pact; some don’t.”

I couldn’t understand why they wouldn’t, but it was at least evident that Ahid was only able to summon Arcana through his pact.

“Why do gods hold the Selection Trial? What are they trying to do by choosing an agent?”

“A detailed explanation is available at Everastanzetta, Institute of the Gods. As I stated earlier, it’s currently located in the underground world, in the holy capital.”

Currently? Did that mean Everastanzetta was able to move locations?

“In that case, will you take me there?”

“I’m afraid I can’t. You will have to travel to Everastanzetta by yourself.”

Frankly speaking, I had no obligation to go there, but there was one thing I was curious about—the identity of the god before me. Why was Arcana able to use the miracle of the Moon of Creation? Only Militia, the Goddess of Creation, should have been able to use it. Something might have happened to her, but I

doubted Arcana would answer my questions if I asked.

“The explanation’s over. Do we keep fighting?”

“You taught me about the Selection Trial. I’ll let you off for tonight.”

“I see.”

Arcana looked up at the sky, and the crescent moon Altiertonoa disappeared with the falling lunar snowdrops.

“Before you go, I have one question,” I said.

Arcana looked at me.

“What did you mean by what you said earlier this afternoon? Was that by Ahid’s order as well?”

She cast Gatom in silence, but just before she disappeared...

“I’m searching for the answer,” a voice echoed quietly.

§ 20. Phys Ed with the Conflagration King

Enora Meadow.

Sixty kilometers southwest of Gairadite lay a broad, grassy meadow. The students of the Demon King Academy and the Hero Academy were gathered in this unspoiled field filled with greenery and flowers. Before the students stood three teachers: Eldmed, Shin, and Emilia.

“Today, we’ll be holding a physical education class in preparation for hunting dragons,” Eldmed said grandly. “Physical abilities cannot be developed overnight, but you can learn how to handle yourselves properly in a battle against a dragon. Once you learn that, bringing one down will be a piece of cake.” He spun his cane and tapped it on the ground. “So let’s start with a game of tag.”

The students of the Hero Academy sighed.

“You’ve gotta be joking,” Raos moaned listlessly. “We’re gonna be facing actual real-life monsters. What good’s a game of tag?”

“Exactly,” Heine said with a nod. “Here I was expecting a proper lesson on the topic. What a letdown.”

Ledriano lifted his glasses. “I understand that the basics are important, but I can’t see us defeating a dragon in ten days if we move at this pace. Shouldn’t our classes be a little tougher?”

Emilia glared at the three of them. “Raos, Heine, Ledriano, are you three unable to quiet down and listen to the class?”

“We weren’t talking to you, Emilia.”

“That’s Ms. Emilia to you!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Heine replied, dismissing her with a mocking wave.

“That would be fine with me, Ms. Emilia. Bwa ha ha! There’s nothing wrong with being studious about learning.”

At Eldmed's words, Emilia reluctantly backed down.

"In that case," Eldmed continued, "without using any magic, the three of you will run over to that tree. If you can reach it within three minutes, I will prepare a tougher class for you. How does that sound?"

"Three minutes? Hey now, you shouldn't look down on us humans too much. Three minutes is easy," Raos said with a snort.

The Conflagration King took off his top hat, reached inside, and pulled out three hourglasses. "You have until the sand runs out." He floated the hourglasses in the air and then spun them over. "Go."

With that, the three heroes started running languidly towards the tree. Although they weren't particularly motivated, their training at the Hero Academy until now meant their bodies were well trained, and they could move much faster than the average human. In ten seconds, they had crossed half the distance.

"Ha ha, we could walk the rest of the way and still make it."

"What does the Demon King Academy think we'll gain from such an easy exercise?"

Just then, the ground exploded.

"What the—"

"AAAAAAAAGH!"

A huge green dragon with hard scales, enormous wings, and sharp fangs emerged from beneath the earth. It shot into the air and hovered there, beating its wings to keep its thirty-meter-long body airborne. After building up speed underground, it had burst through the surface, sending the three heroes flying across the ground. They were now lying still, covered in blood and no longer breathing.

"H-Heine?! Raos? Ledriano?!" Emilia shrieked in concern. She immediately tried running towards them, but one glance from the dragon had her frozen in fear.

Eldmed grinned as though this was exactly what he had planned. "Bwa ha ha!

Yesterday's investigation led us to a dragon's nest in this area. If you provoke them, they'll fly out of nowhere and attack, so be careful!"

"Wh-What is the meaning of this, Mr. Eldmed?! Wasn't today meant to be a physical education class focused on improving our movements by playing tag?"

"Precisely. Today we'll be playing tag with dragons! There's only so much that verbal lectures and mock battles can prepare you for. Real battles don't always go the way you expect. And so, the swiftest way to prepare oneself is by experiencing the threat of dragons in person!"

Hmm. So he was teaching the students how to handle themselves around dragons by making them outrun them. What a perfectly sensible plan.

"I can't see how everyone will survive this," Emilia protested.

"There's no need for concern."

The hourglasses floating in the air began to glow. A spell activated, and light gathered around the fallen heroes' bodies, healing their wounds and bringing them back from the dead.

"Wh-What just happened?"

"I don't know..."

This was probably their first time dying. The trio exchanged looks of confusion.

"As long as the sand in the Hourglasses of Conflagration keeps on falling, you will be revived as many times as you're killed. If you do not wish to die permanently, then you'd better get back here to flip the hourglasses over."

The moment Eldmed said that, the hovering dragon dived towards the ground. Ledriano, Heine, and Raos desperately tried to evade it, but they were blown aside and killed once more. The dragon proceeded to return beneath the earth from which it had emerged.

"Oh, but I must warn you of one thing: no matter what you do, do *not* get eaten. If you do, your source will be digested, and you'll never revive again."

The Hourglasses of Conflagration glowed, reviving them again. The timepieces were magic items that, when used on an enemy, could initiate a life-taking

curse, or in this case, could become a blessing that saved the lives of allies.

“Damn it. You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“What kind of tag is this?! You just want to watch us die!”

Seeing that the sand in the hourglasses was about to run out, the heroes hurried back and flipped them over.

“Now, now, everyone!” Eldmed called merrily, but the students all looked terrified. “These three courageous heroes have offered up their own bodies to demonstrate the threat! As you can see, even tag can be a life-and-death situation if played against dragons!” He turned to the only calm teacher beside him. “Perhaps you could show us an example, Mr. Shin.”

“Very well.” Shin headed straight for the tree. “Dragons don’t use their Magic Eyes to prey on creatures on the surface,” he told everyone through Leaks. “They detect movement through the ground’s vibrations. By running quietly, you can avoid letting them know your position.”

He started running, but there was no sign of the earlier dragon. This was because he was practically silent as he ran.

“The dragons underground will gradually grow more curious and approach the surface. When that happens, the ground will tremble due to their size. You can detect them yourselves through the soles of your feet.”

When I focused my Eyes in his direction, I noticed a faint tremor near where he was running.

“When the trembles intensify and you can tell the dragon is nearing the surface, you can use your footsteps to lure it out on purpose.”

Shin stomped noisily on the ground. With a ferocious roar, the dragon burst from the ground, but Shin retreated faster than the eye could follow, easily avoiding its charge.

“When you know where it will surface, evading is easy. If you slip through its feet as it rises into the sky, you can easily reach the tree.” He demonstrated this by arriving in no time at all. “And if you’re able to, you can also do the following.”

Shin glared up at the sky. The dragon glared back at him, then twisted its body and stopped flapping its wings. A faint red line appeared across the dragon's neck. It was blood. The head of the dragon slowly dropped off its neck and fell, crashing to the ground along with its enormous body.

"Attack the dragon the moment it leaps out, as there is an opening to do so."

The tremors of the crash caused three more dragons to emerge from the ground, roaring fiercely. This time, the dragons didn't take to the sky, but glared at the students.

"Bwa ha ha! Did you all get that? Now it's time to play tag like your lives depend on it—because they do!"

Eldmed threw his top hat into the air, and from it fell multiple Hourglasses of Conflagration. One hourglass for each student floated in the air beside him.

"Go. Today's lesson won't end until you all reach that tree!"

The students of both academies were still seized with fear after listening to the Conflagration King's words.

"Seriously?"

"Isn't copying Mr. Shin kind of impossible?"

"B-But all we have to do is reach the tree, right? And if we die, we'll be able to recover with the hourglasses."

"You say that, but it'll be over if we're eaten."

It seemed they wouldn't be making up their minds anytime soon.

"Hmm. I'll go next."

"Wait, what? Do you really need to participate, Anosh?" Sasha asked.

"There's something I want to confirm," I replied, strolling over to where the three dragons were waiting.

"Ah, look! Lord Anosh is giving it a try!"

"Do your best, Lord Anosh!"

"You can do it, child genius!"

“Give us a wave, Lord Anosh!”

Responding to the fan union’s cheers, I lifted a hand in a wave. The dragon at the front took that chance to stomp forward and swipe with its claws.

“Eek! Lord Anosh! Behind you!”

“GRRR...”

I shot a glare at the dragon, and its claws froze in place. “Know your place, vermin.”

Seeing the glint in my Magic Eyes, the dragon rolled over and started mewling in a way that reminded me of a cat. It was showing its belly as a sign of surrender.

“Excuse me?!” Heine yelled in shock.

Raos blinked in disbelief. “What on earth...? He made that monster surrender with a single look...”

“What? Are the dragons less intimidating than we thought? Maybe they’re just big in size.”

“I don’t know, but it looks kind of cute like this.”

“Maybe we could survive too.”

“Hey! Snap out of it! You just watched those three die! Anosh is the crazy one here!”

“Oh no,” Ellen said seriously. “This is *that* kind of situation, isn’t it?”

“Are you imagining something strange again?”

“It’s not strange! I’m analyzing the moment!”

“Sure you are. And what’s your conclusion?”

Ellen’s eyes sparkled. “The dragon found Lord Anosh so cute, it fell in love at first sight!”

“Wait a minute. Then what’s that belly-up pose for?”

“It’s asking to have his babies!”

“Can they overcome the species barrier so easily?!”

The girls behind me seemed to be making a commotion about something, but I paid them no mind. They were always like that. Instead, I touched the dragon's head and sent a message using Leaks. It couldn't understand words, but it wasn't stupid. Thoughts could still be communicated to an extent.

"Take me to your nest."

The dragon suddenly got up and plunged into the hole it had come out of. I used Fless to follow it. The dragon used its horns and magic to dig steadily through the earth.

"Wait up, Anosh!" Sasha called.

I turned to see her and Misha chasing after me.

"Where are you going?" Misha asked once they'd caught up.

"As I mentioned last night, Everastanzetta, Institute of the Gods, is supposed to be located in an underground world. I wanted to confirm whether that was true."

Arcana had said there was a city called Gaelahesta beneath the ground. Since I didn't know anything about it, it had to have been built after I had died. Also, the man who had summoned Arcana had mentioned he was a cardinal of a kingdom called Jiordal. I didn't know that name either.

In other words, it was logical to assume that his kingdom was underground as well. The ring he wore had been made of dragon materials, and dragons nested underground. Two thousand years ago, there had been barely any sightings of dragons, and they'd been on the verge of extinction. Nevertheless, they had to have had a food source to replace humans and demons if they had survived underground until now. Thus, the underground world had to be located near the dragons' nests.

"Can I go too?" Misha asked.

"It's uncharted territory where anything could be waiting. At the very least, there are people there capable of summoning gods."

"I want to see what you see." There was no change in her expression, but there was a look of determination in her eyes.

“I want to see it too,” Sasha mumbled. “I know I’m a hindrance and you’d have an easier time going alone, but...”

I put a hand on her head. “No subordinate of mine is a burden. You may accompany me. We’ll return before the end of today’s class.”

“Okay.”

“Got it.”

Misha and Sasha both smiled happily. With our plan sorted, we dived deep into the earth in pursuit of the dragon leading the way.

§ 21. The Holy Capital, Gaelahesta

“Something sounds strange,” Misha said.

A shrill, unpleasant noise was echoing faintly in our ears. Dim, white light could be seen up ahead of us.

“It’s a dragon cry—a magic sound wave emitted from the dragon’s vocal cords. The cry creates a special magic field called a dragon domain. All magic inside the domain is hidden and cannot be seen through Magic Eyes. It’s how they hide their nests.”

Of course, the measure was effective only in hiding their nests from the surface. At this close of a range, the dragon’s cry itself revealed the nest’s location instead.

“Does that mean there’s a dragon nest nearby?” Sasha asked.

“So it seems.”

The moment I replied, the dragon leading our way through the earth began to accelerate, then all of a sudden spread its wings. We had reached an underground cavern where it could fly.

I cast my Magic Eyes around, but the dragon’s cry prevented me from seeing any farther.

“I can’t tell what’s down here,” Misha said, doing the same.

“All we can do is follow that dragon.”

The dragon, with its wings fixed in position, picked up more speed as it descended.

“Wait! It’s going too fast!”

“Yeah...”

Unable to keep up with the dragon’s speed, Sasha and Misha slowly started falling behind. I cast Kurst to grow into my sixteen-year-old self and held out my

hands.

“Grab on.”

Sasha and Misha held on to one hand each.

“Hold on tight. I’m going to speed up.”

I channeled more of my magic into Fless to increase my speed. The distance between us and the dragon promptly began to shorten.

Then, suddenly, the dragon flapped its wings as though to scatter particles of magic, and its huge body came to a halt. When we caught up, our field of view opened up at once. The wall of dirt that had obstructed our surroundings was gone.

Sasha looked down in surprise. “What is this?!”

Far, far below us was a green landscape. There were also rivers, mountains, marshlands, deserts, and wastelands. It was an alien place. There was no blue sky—the space above was sealed with earth—yet below that ceiling was an inhabitable world.

“Look.”

Misha pointed at a city within that world. A variety of buildings stood in a circle, at the center of which was a huge castle. The building was old, grand, and overflowing with magic. I could tell with one look that the castle was a three-dimensional magic circle like Delsgade.

“I can’t believe a place like this was on the other side of the ground. It has a city and everything,” Sasha mumbled.

This was probably the underground world Arcana had mentioned. Two thousand years ago, I had conducted numerous searches for dragon nests, but no matter how far I’d dug, I had never come upon a place like this.

At a glance, the world was roughly the same size as Azesion and Dilhade put together. Even though the dragon’s domain obstructed my Magic Eyes, there was no way I would have missed this place in the Mythical Age. It must have been created after my reincarnation, but even in the span of two thousand years, it would have been impossible for a world of this size to form naturally—

unless by the order of a god, that is.

“Kroooooaaaah!” the dragon cried.

It flapped its green wings and hovered over by a hole in the ceiling. Faint, white light streamed in from the hole, illuminating the underground world below. That had to be the dragon’s nest. The resonance of the dragons’ cries was what brought light to this world.

This wasn’t the only nest either. All around the ceiling were similar holes from which light streamed through.

“Hmm. You may leave now.”

I looked away from the dragon and turned around. Sensing I’d lost interest, the beast flew into the hole in the earth, returning to its nest.

“Want to take a look?” Misha asked, tilting her head as she looked at me.

“We may be turned away, but sure.”

We slowly descended towards the city that could be seen below. Before long, we came close enough to view the streets, even without our Magic Eyes.

There were people walking down there. The city was roughly the same size as Midhaze, but the population seemed much lower. The people were dressed in clothing similar to what Arcana had been wearing. From the way they paid us no mind, it seemed like visitors from the sky weren’t particularly unusual here. Well, that Ahid guy had possessed a considerable amount of magic. He wouldn’t have been able to reach the surface if he couldn’t fly.

“The wavelength of magic of the people here resembles that of humans and demons,” I explained. I had thought he had been disguising himself as a human, but it seemed his magic had been similar to begin with. “If anything, it feels like a mix. It’s similar to that of a half-human, half-demon, though not exactly the same.”

“Did the ancestors of the underground world come from above?” Misha asked.

“Perhaps. Humans and demons might have come to this world long ago and established a nation here. That said, if the people of the surface knew of this

place, they would have left records of it in the history books.”

At the very least, no one from above ground knew anything of the underground world. If their ancestors truly had been humans and demons, how had they come to this world without leaving any traces behind?

“Does that mean people came here secretly a long time ago and established a nation to live quietly without anyone knowing?” Sasha asked.

“Who knows? It could have just as feasibly happened another way.”

We continued our descent towards the underground world and landed without any issue.

“I was worried we’d be attacked or something.”

“Indeed. I wouldn’t have wanted to turn this city into a sea of flames simply because they were uncooperative.”

“Uh, what kind of worry is that?”

I touched the building in front of us. The material wasn’t stone, wood, or metal.

“Dragon bone?” Misha asked, tilting her head.

“Apparently so. I’m surprised you can tell.”

“It was just a feeling.”

Her Magic Eyes were impressive as always. Only earlier today had she seen a dragon for the first time.

“Say, is this that city you wanted to go to, Anos? Or is Gaelahesta another city?” Sasha asked.

“Things would be much easier if so. The best would be to have someone lead us around, but unfortunately, I don’t have any acquaintances underground.” Sensing a gaze on us, I turned around and cast my Eyes down the alleyway behind us. “No—I suppose I do have one. You sure enjoy tailing others, don’t you?”

A tall man with long hair covering one side of his face stepped out from the alley. It was Ahid Alover Agartz, the cardinal of Jiordal, Kingdom of the Divine

Dragon. He came to a stop before me.

“Hmm. Are you going to make a fuss about that trial of yours?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, Gaelahesta is a holy land where a nonaggression pact was agreed to. No form of conflict is permitted here. There’s only one place in the holy capital where the Selection Trial may be conducted.”

Gaelahesta, huh? So we’d arrived at the right spot on the first try.

“In that case, can you tell me where the Institute of the Gods is located? I was told that if I went there, I could receive an explanation on the Selection Trial.”

Ahid turned around as though to ignore my words. Well, whatever. We’d just have to find it ourselves.

“I’m headed for Everastanzetta as we speak,” he said before briskly marching away. I followed him. “My Selection God, Arcana, bestowed me with a divine message—that you are unaware of the Selection Trial.”

“Are you sure? You called me a heretic, didn’t you?”

“It is precisely because you are a heretic that I cannot take away your opportunity to know our god. The Almighty Radiance will always extend a hand of salvation to those who show repentance.”

“I see. So the teachings of your god dictate that you help the person you tried to kill yesterday. You religious types don’t have it easy.”

“The superficial hearts of mere mortals cannot understand the will of god,” Ahid said as he walked. “You will only learn the truth of the Almighty Radiance when you learn to devote your heart.”

I continued following him until we reached the huge castle we had seen from the sky.

“This is Everastanzetta, Institute of the Gods: the holy castle bestowed upon us by god.”

Ahid took a step forward and opened the enormous gate by himself. On the other side stood a silver-haired girl—it was the Selection God Arcana.

“Welcome to Everastanzetta, Anos Voldigoad, Misfit chosen by a Selection

God,” she said, plainly but solemnly. “I will now explain more about the Selection Trial and how to form a pact with your god. Follow me. The other candidates are waiting.”

She turned her back, and we entered Everastanzetta.

§ 22. Everastanzetta, Institute of the Gods

Arcana showed us to the center of the institute. It was a completely white room with eight seats that formed a circle. Light from the ceiling shone down like glittering white veils over the seats, illuminating all but one. Behind the eight seats were tiered galleries lined with chairs.

“This is the Holy Seat Hall,” Ahid said, walking up from behind me. “The Holy Seats are the seats reserved for those with the right to become agents of god—in other words, the Selected Eight. These eight seats are the Holy Seats.”

Shadows could be seen beneath three of the veils of light. The remaining four spaces seemed unoccupied. The light had the ability to block Magic Eyes from seeing the face and magic of whomever sat within the light. It was a power akin to the order of a god.

“When a chosen one forms a pact with a god, they obtain the right to sit upon a Holy Seat. The empty seat there is yours, Misfit Anos Voldigoad.” Ahid pointed at the seat with no light shining over it. “Although you are yet to form a pact, you have been chosen by a god. Sit there and pledge your participation in the Selection Trial to the Almighty Radiance. Then the light from above will illuminate your Holy Seat.”

I slowly walked towards the Holy Seat and glanced at it. Then I turned back to Ahid without sitting down. “Unfortunately, I don’t worship this Equis of yours. I have no interest in the Selection Trial or becoming an agent of god. Once I’ve asked all my questions, I’ll be leaving.”

Seething with anger, Ahid glared at me, but another voice spoke up.

“Foolish heretic who knows no fear. How dare you look down on the sacred Selection Trial?”

The man expressing his rage was seated in one of the Holy Seats. His face was unclear due to the veil, but he had a strong build.

“That is not my intention,” I replied. “You are free to worship this Almighty

Radiance all you wish. I won't stop you. But whether I follow them or not is another matter."

"That is what it means to look down on our god, you heretic!" the man yelled.

I stared coldly at his shadowy figure. "Ridiculous. If you have something to say, at least show yourself when you say it. The wails of a coward aren't worth listening to."

The man abruptly stood up and swung his arm to the side, sweeping away the veil of light. A muscular man with a bald head was revealed. Beneath his armor, he wore similar robes to Ahid's, and there was a familiar ring on his index finger.

"I am Gazel Apt Ageila, holy knight of Jiordal, the Kingdom of the Divine Dragon, and the Selected Eight bestowed with the title of Saint! Misfit Anos Voldigoad, I offer you the salvation of god." He took a heavy step forward and glowered menacingly.

"Hmm. But I'm in no need of salvation."

"The words of a heretic cannot be trusted!" Gazel raised his hand with his ring into the air. Magic gathered around it, but the next moment, a single lunar snowdrop fell before him. He whirled around to look at Arcana.

"The nonaggression pact applies even in the Holy Seat Hall of Everastanzetta," she said.

"This isn't a fight. It's salvation."

"Child of dragons, this isn't a matter of phrasing. The gods are always watching you."

Gazel gritted his teeth. "As the Almighty Radiance wishes."

He sat back in his Holy Seat and shot me a condescending look.

"Ahid, the explanation," Arcana said.

He nodded. "Misfit Anos Voldigoad, your questions about the Selection Trial shall be answered. If you do not wish to sit in the Holy Seat, you may listen while standing."

“I’ll do just that.”

Ahid turned to the remaining two figures sitting in the Holy Seats. “Is that fine with you two?”

The figures nodded. It seemed there were only four of them here today.

“Gods are the order of this world—they are the hands of salvation that Equis, the Almighty Radiance, has extended to this world.” Ahid faced me once again as he spun his words with a solemn air. “However, there always comes a time when a god and their order is lost. That loss is an opportunity for a new birth. An agent is chosen from the people of this world to replace what was lost.”

Hmm. So the agents were replacements for perished gods.

“The Almighty Radiance gives those agents a chance to reach divinity. That chance is our light and salvation, the mercy of Equis.”

Really now? I wasn’t so sure the gods had ever shown people mercy.

When I’d transformed Abernyu, the Goddess of Destruction, into Delsgade, the order of destruction had been lost. Other gods had tried to supplement it, but the order had never been completely restored. That was simply part of order, and as gods were order themselves, there was nothing they could do about it. Perhaps they were trying to use other life-forms in order to restore their losses.

“The candidates for becoming agents are called the Selected Eight, each of whom have been deemed worthy by a Selection God. Those Eight form pacts with their gods—”

Arcana raised her hand, and a single lunar snowdrop fell before me. It glowed dimly before transforming into a clear black gemstone. At that center of that gemstone was a scarlet stone, but there was no light within that stone.

“This is a Selection pledge jewel. Pledge jewels were used in ancient times to make pacts between man and gods. Among them, Selection pledge jewels are particularly special, as they can only be made by the Selection Gods for the Selected Eight. Once the pact is formed, the fire within will be lit.”

I held the pledge jewel in my hand. So the ring Ahid wore glowed because of

the fire within the scarlet stone at the center.

“How does one form a pact with a god?”

“The details of the pact vary from god to god, but they all have one thing in common: you must vow to trust in your god, and then the god will guide you.”

Trust in a god, huh? I highly doubted such a connection could be made so easily.

“By making the pledge, the candidate obtains the power of their god. Then they wait together for the sacred Selection Trial, in which the eight Selection Gods decide the candidate most worthy of becoming an agent of this world’s order.”

“Hmm. Just to confirm, that means one of the eight Selection Gods chose me as a candidate, right?”

Ahid nodded.

“But my Selection God has never shown themself to me.”

“By selecting a candidate, a god gains another order in addition to their original order. This order gives them the right to become a Selection God.”

That made sense.

“In other words, the god that selected me wasn’t a Selection God at that point?”

“Yes. They became a Selection God after choosing you. I don’t know why they’ve chosen not to reveal themself to you, but the gods always have their own noble reasons. Your title, Misfit, was given to you for your heresy, so that you can realize the magnificence of the gods and correct your ways.”

So, for example, if Militia had chosen me, she would be a Selection God in addition to being the Goddess of Creation. The problem, however, was why the god who’d selected me hadn’t revealed themself.

Perhaps they weren’t an ally. They could be plotting my downfall by dragging me into the Selection Trial. Or perhaps because my memories were incomplete, and I simply couldn’t remember them.

“At the very least, it is certain that you were selected by a god. That Holy Seat has your name and title engraved into it by your Selection God.”

My name was indeed engraved on the Holy Seat, along with the title of Misfit.

“Gods must also be at risk of perishing in the Selection Trial. Wouldn’t losing their orders be a problem?”

“Gods involved in the Selection Trial cannot perish; thus, their order cannot be lost. The pact made with the Selection pledge jewel maintains their order.”

I looked at the pledge jewel in my hand. It seemed to be quite the impressive item.

“I’ve got the gist of things now, but I still have no interest in the trial. If anything, I’d find it problematic if an agent were born here, especially after all the trouble I went through removing the order of destruction from this world.”

There was also the possibility that a god had selected me to prevent me from putting a stop to the trial. If I destroyed every other candidate, I would be setting myself up to become the agent of god. Had they given up on destroying me in favor of turning me into a god instead?

“It doesn’t matter what you want, Misfit Anos Voldigoad. As one of the Selected Eight, you are left with one of two choices: await your trial and walk the path of faith, or turn your back on god and perish.”

“So you’re saying there’s no withdrawing once a god has selected you.”

Ahid nodded gravely. “That’s right. Gods are the order of this world. No one can defy them. Your will is nothing before god.”

“For a human, you sure speak like a god.”

At any rate, I now understood what this trial was about. If the gods were involved, then it almost certainly meant trouble. I would have disregarded the whole thing if it were isolated to the underground world, but I couldn’t imagine Ahid infiltrating the Hero Academy just to make contact with me. If all he wanted was to speak to me, he wouldn’t have needed to become a student.

“Also, I will give you one warning: until you find your god and make your pact, you shouldn’t step out of Gaelahesta. However, you shouldn’t linger within

Everastanzetta either.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“With the exception of the Holy Seat Hall, the nonaggression pact does not apply to Everastanzetta’s grounds. After all, this is a place for the Selected Eight to demonstrate their faith.”

That meant candidates were free to fight anywhere in Everastanzetta besides the Holy Seat Hall.

“You’ve shown your true face to the candidates here. You’ve also revealed your lack of pact with a god. The moment you step out of the nonaggression zone, you will be the perfect prey.”

Each one of the Selected Eight, aside from me, was able to summon the god they had made a pact with. Apparently, they assumed that without a pact, I would be an easy target to destroy. Considering how the Selection Trial worked, it made sense to crush one’s opponents before they could gather their strength.

“Have you forgotten what happened just the other day? Who was it that set off running with their tail between their legs?”

Ahid was unshaken by my question. “That’s easy to explain,” he said in an all-knowing tone. “Since you haven’t made a pact with your god, you must have formed an alliance with another candidate and borrowed their god’s power instead.”

Well, I suppose it couldn’t be helped. Admittedly, it *was* easier to believe that someone had borrowed the power of a god than to believe someone already possessed the power of a god. No one was capable of assuming things beyond their imagination. I myself had never imagined something like the Selection Trial.

“However, it is unclear who you formed your alliance with and whether they are here today,” Ahid continued, glaring at the candidates in the Holy Seats. “But now that your trick has been revealed, your partner will have to act carefully. With the other candidates keeping a watchful eye, your partner can’t lend you the power of their god so easily. It would do you well to proceed with caution.”

That aside, it was oddly gracious of him to explain all of this to an enemy like me. It seemed he truly believed this was not a fight, but a trial of the gods.

“I have one last question,” I said. “How did this underground world come to be?”

“That is unrelated to the Selection Trial. I have no obligation to answer a heretic.”

“Well, whatever. The Institute of the Gods must have a textbook or two on the topic.”

Ahid gestured towards the magic circle on the landing of the staircase to the west. “That magic circle is connected to the thirteenth floor of this institute. There, you’ll find the tablet room with records of the past. They describe how this world came to be.”

“Is that something you can tell a heretic?”

“If it’s an explanation to do with Everastanzetta, yes.”

What a troublesome religion to be bound to.

“However, the Holy Seat Hall is the only area bound by the nonaggression pact.”

“So you said. Let’s go, Misha, Sasha.”

The two girls nodded and followed me up the staircase to reach the fixed magic circle. Once inside, I activated it, and our vision turned white. A moment later, we found ourselves in a spacious room filled with a vast array of stone tablets. In front of many of them were people dressed in uniforms—they must have been students of the institute. From what I could tell, they were all in the middle of deciphering the text on the tablets.

“Hmm. Hopefully it’s a recognizable text.”

“Isn’t that pretty unlikely?” Sasha asked. “We may have the same ancestors, but their culture is totally different to that of the world aboveground. They usually use runes for stuff like this.”

Misha nodded silently beside her.

Nevertheless, we made our way before an unoccupied tablet. I looked upon it, and sure enough, the writing was unfamiliar.

“You sure are a foolish heretic, ignoring the cardinal’s warning like that,” a voice called from behind us. It was Gazel, the bald Saint who’d picked a fight with me earlier.

“Oh well. I’ll figure out the pattern after looking at a few of them.”

“Uh, are you just going to ignore what’s behind us?” Sasha asked. “I think he’s talking to you.”

“There’s no need to pay attention to the words of someone without basic manners.”

The next moment, Gazel grabbed my shoulder. “Receive the salvation of god, heretic!”

I shrugged my shoulder lightly to shake off his hand. “You’re in the way. Shoo.”

“What... Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

Gazel flew backwards, crashing through four rows of stone tablets before finally stopping at the fifth. The students of the institute screamed.

“Ugh... H-How dare you spill the blood of one as holy as myself?!” Gazel’s face twisted with fury as he spat out a mouthful of blood. “What a sinful person! Soon, you’ll be begging for god’s forgiveness... Heretic...”

Gazel staggered to his feet and glared at me.

“Gazel, was it? We can fight if you want,” I said, taking a few steps towards him. “But call your god first. You won’t last a second otherwise.”

§ 23. Summoning the Saint

Still glaring, Gazel cast healing magic on himself.

“How dare a heretic make a mockery of the Saint! You shall repent for this, ignorant fool from the surface. Today is the day you shall behold the almighty power of the gods and realize your sins!”

He thrust out his right hand, on which he wore the pledge jewel ring. Seeing the magic flow from his body, the students of the institute started muttering among themselves.

“That’s Saint Gazel over there...”

“Doesn’t that mean there’s a Selection Trial underway?”

Despite the battle about to commence, the students started kneeling on the floor and folding their hands in prayer.

“O Equis, the Almighty Radiance, thank you for blessing us with the chance to witness this holy event.”

“Please lead this world down the correct path.”

“Bring us salvation, and punish the sinners.”

Their prayers could be heard across the room. Meanwhile, Gazel closed his eyes and began reciting an incantation.

“O Selection God, heed my call— Urk!”

His incantation stopped midway. I had casually approached him as his eyes were closed and thrust my fingers through his throat.

“Uh... Guh...”

Unable to finish his incantation, Gazel opened and closed his mouth wordlessly.

“During my fight with Ahid earlier, something crossed my mind. If that recitation is a requirement, you’ll never be able to use summoning magic in

front of me.”

“You...dare...”

I withdrew my fingers and let him collapse against the stone tablet.

“How dare you interrupt the sacred prayer? What kind of selected one are you?! How far will you go to insult the gods?!”

“Like I said already, I have no recollection of becoming such a thing.” I took a step forward.

“Fool. I am a holy knight! Don’t put me on the same level as a priest who relies on the power of a god!”

Gazel jumped up, drawing the sword at his waist. He used it to slash at my neck, but the blade snapped upon contact.

“What?!”

“Hmm. I was wondering how good you’d be, but my subordinate is a thousand times faster.” I held my hand over Gazel’s face. “*Jio Graze.*”

The black sun swallowed his body, burning him to ashes in no time at all. Once the black flames receded, only the pledge jewel ring remained.

“Oh? Not a scratch, huh? It seems this is no ordinary magic item.”

Just then, the center of the pledge jewel lit up, and a magic circle formed over the black stone. The three-dimensional magic circle released a tremendous amount of magic, blanketing the area with pale-blue particles of magic.

The particles formed the shape of a person: an unnaturally long-haired girl holding two staves. She was completely naked, her hair barely hiding her body. The young girl raised her two staves into the air and restored the dead Gazel back to life.

“Tremble in fear, heretic. Behold the noble and almighty power that can revive the dead—this is the miracle of a god!”

“What’s so impressive about a resurrection? If that’s a miracle, then miracles are happening all over the place.”

“What?”

It seemed they didn't need to recite their incantation to summon their god after all. As long as they had that pledge jewel and their pact, the god could appear. How convenient.

"I've seen that god before—the Keeper of Restoration, Nutra Do Hiana."

Gazel smiled in understanding. "I see. You may be a heretic, but at least you know that much. But do you understand what that truly means? Nutra Do Hiana embodies the order of restoration. Your words are meaningless before a god that cannot be destroyed."

"Unlike Ahid, you formed a pact with a worthless god."

I pointed two fingers at Gazel and cast Jirasd. The jet-black bolt of lightning shot straight forward. Nutra Do Hiana moved in front of Gazel and used her two staves to block the attack. The black lightning traveled down the staves and incinerated the god's body, which restored itself before our very eyes.

"All attacks are worthless before the order of restoration. It's time for you to fear the gods and beg for salvation."

The moment Gazel made his declaration, Nutra Do Hiana's right hand transformed into particles of light and disappeared.

"A-AAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!"

The god's scream echoed through the air.

"Wh-What's wrong, my deity?! Nutra Do Hiana, why won't your wounds heal?!"

"Leave her be. Your god is busy right now. If you interfere, you'll die."

Completely ignoring my advice, Gazel began to yell. "Restore yourself, Nutra Do Hiana! Show your miracle!"

The next moment, a blinding light enveloped the Keeper of Restoration. The light separated into particles that scattered as if blown away by a gust of wind.

"What...? What just happened? My deity..." Gazel stared at the empty space where the Keeper of Restoration had been standing.

"I used Jirasd to draw a magic circle inside Nutra Do Hiana's body. It was the

circle for Gagalia, a spell that enhances and amplifies restorative powers. However, excess restoration is a poison. Using Gagalia on Nutra Do Hiana's already powerful restoration ability has adverse effects on her body."

That being said, Gagalia was only the groundwork for defeating Nutra Do Hiana.

"When the Keeper of Restoration realized I had cast Gagalia, she suppressed her ability as much as she could. It was your needless order that made her disappear."

Most Keepers were incapable of speaking for themselves. It was no surprise that these two couldn't communicate with each other.

"What kind of follower is unaware of their god's weaknesses? You've slacked on your studies."

Gazel burst into laughter. "You're the one lacking in faith, you insolent brat!"

Magic circles stacked upon each other over the pledge jewel on the floor. The next moment, my Magic Eyes noticed a surge of incredible power, and the pledge jewel ring disappeared. Actually, no. It wasn't only the ring that had disappeared. Gazel was gone too.

"Where are you looking, heretic?"

I turned to see him behind me, the ring on his finger once more. His entire body was glowing with light.

"Oh?"

I held out my hand and cast Jirasd. However, the black bolt of lightning weaved past his body—he had moved behind me faster than my spell could reach him.

"I almost didn't recognize you there. How did you get so fast?"

"This is Azept. By having my god descend into my body, her order becomes mine. In other words, everything I do is now the work of the gods."

So this was the other summoning method Ahid had mentioned. It seemed there was no limit to the number of gods that could be summoned. He must have formed a pact with another god besides his Selection God.

“That speed is the order of light, isn’t it?”

Gazel grinned fearlessly. “Behold! My Selection God is the order of light—the God of Brilliance, Giosselia! Look carefully, for this is the great light that illuminates this world!”

The Saint raised his broken sword over his head. A magic circle appeared there. Magic gathered around the broken sword, transforming it into a spear. The sharp end resembled a dragon’s fang.

“This is artifact evocation. By summoning a god to descend into a weapon, the blade gains the magic of that god. And *this* is the divine artifact of the holy knight Gazel Apt Ageila: the Divine Spear Behetenos, imbued with Beheus’s order of piercing!”

Gazel’s body shone as he held the spear ready. A moment later, it disappeared completely, transforming into light.

“Foolish demon from above. I shall teach you, the heretic who denies the gods, how those of the underground fight. The eyes of a fool who does not see god will be unable to keep me in their sights. Through the possession of the God of Brilliance, I have become light—and there is nothing faster in this world!”

His voice could be heard, but his form was nowhere to be seen. Gazel had become light just like he’d said and was running in circles around me.

“Without a god, you have no chance! This is the moment of your salvation!”

Light flashed from every direction around me. The Divine Spear Behetenos thrust forward at the speed of light, aimed straight at my face. I tilted my head to the side and let the spear pass by my cheek.

“What?! You dodged that?” Gazel muttered in disbelief.

“How long are you going to look down on me for? Bring out your best already. Or is that all you can do?”

“Th-That had to be a fluke! The spear of god cannot be evaded!”

The spear of light blinked, thrust one thousand times in a single breath. I clad myself with Beno levun and deflected the attacks.

“It can’t be... That’s not possible!”

Gazel's feet came to a halt.

"It's my turn next."

I closed in on him from the front and thrust out my right hand. He turned back into light and evaded me.

"Uwah! I suppose you weren't chosen for nothing. However, though you might have blocked my spear, you cannot stop my feet!"

The glittering light around me glowed even brighter as Gazel increased his speed.

"This is the miracle of Giosselia, the God of Brilliance! No one in existence can reach the almighty speeds of god!"

"Hmm. There you are."

I grabbed the moving light with my Ygg Neas covered hand.

"What... How?!"

"There, I've caught you."

After pulling him towards me, I lifted him up and slammed him against the ground. With a resounding crash, the stone floor shattered, and Gazel coughed up blood.

"Gah...hah... Just...how?!" he spluttered in disbelief.

"Did you think you could escape me if you ran at the speed of light?"

The Divine Spear Behetenos rolled across the floor. Gazel grabbed my hand in an attempt to shake me off, but I didn't even budge.

"Agh... It can't be. How could someone without a god catch someone as holy as I?"

"If you move as fast as the God of Brilliance, then all I have to do is move faster."

With Vebzud coating my right hand, I pierced his chest and grasped his source.

"Gargh!"

“It’s time to see if there’s truly no effect on an order when it’s destroyed during the trial.”

“You godless fool! You think you can destroy god?! That’s sacrilege! This god isn’t the same as a keeper! Your mortal self cannot destroy my Selection God, the symbol of holiness itself, without the power of another deity!”

With my mauve Magic Eyes, I gazed at the god within him and clenched my hand, squeezing the source in my palm. The tremendous magic surrounding Gazel disappeared.

“What...? The power of my god...disappeared... My god is fading... That can’t be. Stop! Stop it! Stop it right now, you heretic!”

I crushed the source of the god completely. Its power vanished without a trace.

“Ah... Ah... My deity... The symbol of holiness... Aaaaaah!”

I picked up the Divine Spear that had fallen to the floor and crushed that too, destroying Beheus, God of Piercing.

“It’s gone... My deity... My god... How...?”

“Holy knight crawling on the ground, it’s my turn to teach you.” I looked down at Gazel, who was kneeling with a lifeless look in his eyes. “This is how the Demon King of the surface fights without relying on a god.”

§ 24. The Inscribed Revelation

“Saint Gazel has been defeated in the holy war,” mumbled one of the students who had been watching the fight. “The hero of Jiordal, Kingdom of the Divine Dragon, has lost...”

The other students began to speak up one after another.

“The Saint said his opponent doesn’t have a god. It must be the Misfit from above ground.”

“But how can that be possible?! Without summoning a god, there should have been no way to beat the great Saint.”

“Right. He exceeded the great order of light—the power of Giosselia, the God of Brilliance—with a mere mortal body. It can’t be possible—at least, it shouldn’t be possible.”

“But the Saint wouldn’t lie!”

“Then who is that man? Even with ten thousand miracles, a faithless heretic shouldn’t be able to bring down god!”

“He didn’t even summon a dragon!”

“How can that be? How in the world was he fighting, then?”

“Relax! This must be a test bestowed on us by the gods!”

It seemed that summoning magic was the mainstream magic of the underground world. The students seemed utterly bewildered by how I had defeated Gazel without calling upon a god and were making a fuss among themselves.

“Devil...” muttered one voice tainted with awe. “He’s a devil in the shape of a man.”

That was the conclusion the students of Everastanzetta ultimately came to. As for Gazel, the man was busy trembling on the floor while repeatedly calling for his god like a madman.

When I looked over at his pledge jewel ring, I saw three blue flames alight within the black stone—one for each god destroyed. So this was what it meant by the pledge preventing gods from being destroyed. The defeated gods were sealed in their candidate’s pledge jewel, which allowed their orders to be maintained.

“That’s more like it. Now, where was I?”

I rejoined Sasha and Misha, and looked down at the stone tablet.

“Could you refrain from destroying gods like you’re chasing away stray cats? We’re getting some really cold stares,” Sasha muttered, glancing at the students.

“That’s just because this place is deeply religious. It must be rare for them to see people stronger than the gods, but they’ll get used to it eventually.”

“Misha, say something.”

Misha blinked a few times and looked at me. “Confident.”

“You mean shameless?” Sasha snapped.

Misha tilted her head. “Humble?”

“It’d be scarier if he *were* humble after wiping out the gods so easily.” Sasha stood beside me and looked down at the tablet I was analyzing. “So how do we decipher a stone tablet written in a language we don’t know?”

I called out to the students still watching us. “We want to read the tablet. Can any of you help us decipher it?”

The students promptly averted their gazes, but one girl among them found the courage to speak up. “Unfortunately, no believer here is impious enough to assist a heretic.”

“Then forget it. I’ll figure it out myself.”

The student looked displeased. “We’ve been studying these stone tablets for hundreds of years. The gods won’t allow a heretic like you to decipher them.”

“Well, just watch. Once I’m done, I’ll tell you what it says.”

I looked back at the tablet.

“So what’s the plan?” Sasha asked.

Misha pointed to another tablet. “Half of it is in ancient runes.”

Her eyes were as sharp as ever.

“We can translate the text based on the placement of the characters. If we start from the ancient runes, we can use them to decipher anything left.”

“Can that be done so quickly?”

I cast my Magic Eyes around at the other tablets in the room. “Hmm. It seems these unknown characters are called prayer runes.”

“Huh?”

“It says the underground world was born roughly two thousand years ago. The residents of this place are the children of dragons, otherwise known as draconids.”

“W-Wait a minute. Have you deciphered it already?” Sasha asked in shock.

“Only half of it, but I get the gist of what it’s saying.”

I focused my Eyes on the countless stone tablets in the room and read the history of the underground world from them.

Misha tilted her head curiously. “Children of dragons?”

“It seems their ancestors were dragons.”

“Dragons give birth to people?”

“It’s my first time hearing of it too.”

That being said, dragons were mysterious creatures with immense amounts of magic. It wouldn’t be entirely out of the question for them to give birth to people. I continued reading the tablets to find further details.

“It’s written here that when dragons consume the sources of humans and demons, those sources are given new life in their wombs and are reborn. Although ‘draconid’ is the generic term for those who live here, the people directly born from dragons are called dragonborn.”

The womb of a dragon produced a similar effect to Syrica, making it a

reincarnation organ.

“Dragonborn possess not only powerful magic, but also the abilities of dragons. This is because they are the consolidation of all the sources a dragon has eaten, born as one single new life.”

“That’s absurd...”

And, with each passing generation, the draconids’ power weakened.

“Most of the draconids in the current underground world are eighth-or ninth-generation descendants.”

There were probably first-generation draconids—dragonborn—around as well. Maybe even their reincarnations were present.

“The underground world consists of three nations, one holy city, and the dome. The dome is the canopy of earth that covers the sky—in other words, the surface. The three nations are Jiordal, Kingdom of the Divine Dragon; Agaha, Kingdom of the Royal Dragon; and Gadeciola, Kingdom of the Supreme Dragon. These three kingdoms are constantly at war with each other, the reason being... Hmm. Religious differences, huh?”

The tablets didn’t describe the issue in detail, but I could imagine they often warred over the gods and the way they interpreted religion. Such religious conflicts existed above ground as well.

“Why are they so close to the gods here?” Misha asked.

“Apparently the first Selection Trial was held here. That was how the draconid people learned about the existence of gods. A dragonborn was chosen as an agent in that trial. They made a pact with a god and introduced the pledge jewel used for summoning them here.”

Pledge jewels were rare, but unlike Selection pledge jewels, they could be used outside of the Selection Trial. With them, the draconids, who had gained the ability to summon, had been able to survive the harsh conditions of the underground world, where sunlight was nonexistent and food was scarce. Ever since then, the people had worshipped the gods. Eventually, three religions had formed, which had developed into three nations. Thus, war had begun.

“That aside, this isn’t quite what I’m after.”

What I wanted to know about wasn’t the strife between the kingdoms, but how this underground world had come to be in the first place.

“Someone must have created this world.”

The space was vast and an environment in which people could live—albeit with the borrowed power of summoned gods. Without a considerable amount of effort, even I would have been incapable of creating such a thing. If any god had used their order to create it, it had to have been Militia. She might have appeared there at some point in time.

“Anos,” Misha said, walking over to the wall. However, there was nothing there. Even when I stared into the abyss, I couldn’t see anything. But Misha touched the wall without hesitation, sending her magic into it. A flash of light later, runes appeared on the wall.

“I...I can’t believe it!” one of the students cried, trembling from head to toe.

“Not even the gods can detect the secret runes of Everastanzetta,” another called, “and yet...”

“How could a heretic from the surface see them?!”

For once, their shock seemed well-founded. After all, even my own Eyes had failed to see them.

“How did you know, Misha?” I asked.

She tilted her head. “I thought I saw something here. It was just a feeling.”

Hmm. So she hadn’t seen them clearly. Misha’s Eyes had always been good, but it seemed they were getting better over time. My subordinate’s growth was quite frightening, and that’s coming from me.

“It’s no use, heretic!” one student yelled, as if they couldn’t keep silent. “The secret runes of Everastanzetta are a divine message!”

“Those without faith can’t even read the preface!”

“No one in over a thousand years has been able to decipher the main body. The words of god cannot be deciphered by a heretic like you!”

“Leave this place! This isn’t a space for someone who cannot read those words!”

I skimmed the words on the wall. “Hmm, I see. ‘It all started here in this castle, Everastanzetta,’ did it?”

As though confirming I was correct, the runes on the wall glowed a bluish-white as I began to read aloud. The students, unable to believe what they were seeing, gazed on with dumbfounded faces.

“What... What... What is this?”

“How can the words of god...”

“A heretic read the preface of the divine message...”

“No. This has to be the devil’s plot! Our faith is being tested!”

The students got to their knees and started praying again.

“That aside, how come you can read it?” Sasha asked, shooting me a questioning look. “These are different runes than before.”

“I once asked Militia what kind of writing the gods used. There are multiple scripts, and this is one of them: eternal runes.”

“Can the gods read it?” Misha asked.

“They can, but they wouldn’t tell us what it says.”

I pointed at the symbols on the wall. “This is a message to other gods. When gods see eternal runes, they won’t divulge their meaning to anyone else.”

Even a summoned god would refuse to decipher the message. Eternal runes were written with magic. Explaining how to read it wouldn’t help—one needed Divine Eyes to do so. That was why it hadn’t been deciphered until now.

“‘It was an endless night of perpetual nothingness...’”

I continued reading.

Far beneath the ground, a castle of god was born,

To shine a gentle light over the night with no beginning.

Above ground, the sun didn't rise, and destruction never came.

No life was born, and the world came to a stop.

Order or people, which mattered more?

You know the answer.

You're the only one who knows the answer.

§ 25. An Offering to the Gods

“What does it mean?” Sasha asked, tilting her head in confusion.

“A god built a castle here in the underground, illuminating the never-ending night. That order of creation was what made this underground world.”

I didn’t know the details, but it was clear that this world had been created by a god’s order. However, nothing in the text confirmed its creation was Militia’s doing. Arcana could also use the Moon of Creation, so she, too, had the ability to create a world. Now what I was most curious about was how Arcana and Militia were related.

“Then what does the line ‘No life was born, and the world came to a stop’ mean?” Sasha asked.

“When I brought Abernyu, Goddess of Destruction, down from the sky and removed the order of destruction from this world, life that should have been destroyed continued to exist. Because of that, new life stopped being created, and the world stagnated.”

The number of sources that were circulating the world was fixed. Birth and destruction were two sides of the same coin.

“Perhaps that was an undesirable effect.”

But just because there was new life waiting to be born didn’t mean destruction was acceptable. The gods only cared for their own circumstances—as far as they were concerned, if there were new lives waiting to be born, then the living had to die to make way. There was no reason to obey such a thing.

“The rest is the same as what’s written on the other tablets.”

I glanced through the rest and read it aloud. The remaining runes on the wall glowed the same bluish-white.

“That’s the light described in the legends,” a surprised voice muttered behind me. “Don’t tell me he really deciphered it all...”

“How in the world? The secret script no one could decipher for over a thousand years was read by a heretic from the surface!”

“O Equis, the Almighty Radiance, please enlighten us. What kind of trial is this?”

The students of the institute reeled in shock, falling to their knees and clutching their hands in prayer. At that moment, another murmur could be heard.

“My god...”

With a vacant look in his eyes, Gazel staggered to his feet.

“My god hasn’t abandoned me yet,” He fled towards the fixed magic circle, but he was stopped before he reached it. A silver-haired girl had appeared before him. Arcana quietly held out her hand.

“Your pledge jewel,” she said.

Gazel flinched, clutching his ring as though to hide it from her. “O Selection God Arcana, my judgment is yet to be given. Once I find a new god, I shall return to this holy land once more.”

Arcana shook her head. “By the prayer of the faithful Oracle, Ahid Alover Agartz, I, the Selection God Arcana, shall pass judgment on the Saint, Gazel Apt Ageila.”

Gazel took a step back. “That can’t be. No...”

He turned to run, but his hand was severed and went flying through the air.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

In Arcana’s hand was a sword of snow. Blood dripped from the tip of the blade. She turned her small hand over and lifted it towards the sky. Gazel’s pledge jewel ring fell right into her palm. A man’s voice echoed from the entrance of the room.

“Selection God Giosselia, God of Brilliance; Nutra Do Hiana, Keeper of Restoration; and Beheus, the God of Piercing. In accordance with the rules of the Selection Trial, I offer the orders of these three gods to my deity, Arcana.”

A tremendous amount of magic—the sources of the three gods I had destroyed—began to spill from the pledge jewel ring. The three blue flames within the pledge jewel left the black stone and floated into the air.

“I will receive the offering. The orders of the three gods will become one with mine.”

Arcana stuck out her small tongue. One by one, the three blue flames floated into her mouth, and she swallowed them. Her body glowed with an intense magic light. The sources of the three gods had assimilated with hers. As Ahid had declared, the gods had become offerings for her to consume. In other words, Arcana had obtained the orders of those three gods.

Without casting healing magic to stop the bleeding of his wound, Gazel glared at Ahid. “C-Cardinal, you have you betrayed me! A fellow Jiordan believer, faithful to the Almighty Radiance...!”

Ahid held his hands together in a solemn gesture of prayer. His expression was brimming with an overbearing sense of justice. “I received a divine message. We are not to contest or compete with each other, but to fight together. The Almighty Radiance told me to succeed your will and inherit your gods.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Gazel protested. “What about my salvation? Where is my salvation in all this?! As a holy knight—as the *Saint*—I dedicated my entire life to the gods!”

“This is simply another test for you, Gazel. The gods believe you will overcome this.”

“What nonsense! This is all your doing—how could it be a test?! How could this, the work of a clergyman, be the work of the gods?!”

“Gazel.”

Gazel flinched at the harsh tone.

“Are you doubting the gods? Then, as the cardinal of Jiordal, I declare you excommunicated.”

Unable to argue back, Gazel merely looked at him with despair. In return,

Ahid gave him a gentle smile filled with compassion.

“All people are born with nothing. Everything we possess belongs to the gods. All you are doing is returning that. There’s no need to feel grief.”

Gazel fell to his knees and hung his head in shame.

“Now repent. God will surely forgive you for your sin.”

His whole body trembling, Gazel cried as he spoke. “My deity, the Almighty Radiance, Equis...I have sinned. I have doubted you. Please forgive my attempt to turn against your divine message.”

“O Almighty Radiance, Equis, please forgive the holy knight Gazel, your loyal believer.” Ahid closed his eyes and prayed. “You have been forgiven,” he said after a moment.

“My deity, you have my eternal gratitude,” Gazel said through his tears. He reached down to pick up a fragment of his sword, which had fallen on the floor. “If I could ask for your forgiveness for one more thing, my deity, please allow me to flee from this trial and depart from your side.”

For a brief moment, hesitation and fear flashed across his face, but Gazel discarded his emotions and pressed the fragment of sword to his neck. However, just before the sword fragment pierced his skin, his body froze. A single lunar snowdrop had fallen on Gazel, freezing him solid. Arcana looked at him sadly.

“Arcana, my Selection God, you are merciful, but when that ice melts, he will still attempt to depart for the gods.” Ahid slowly walked up to Gazel and drew a magic circle over his body. “In which case, it is my duty as a servant of the gods to grant him his wish.”

White flames engulfed Gazel’s body. A god had been summoned to melt his body—ice and all—until nothing remained. Ahid then turned quietly around and knelt before Arcana, clutching his hands in prayer.

“O Arcana, my deity, forgive me, for I have sinned. I have taken the precious life of the holy knight Gazel and returned him to the heavens. Please grant me your forgiveness.”

Arcana looked down at Ahid. “I forgive you, Oracle Ahid. Follow the correct path from here on.”

“As the Almighty Radiance wishes.”

Ahid stood up and began to leave the room.

“Hmm. What a terrible farce, Ahid.”

He stopped, turning his head in my direction. “A heretic like you wouldn’t understand.”

“You should say that to the man you just killed.”

“He received salvation.”

“Ha ha ha! Salvation? Because he’s been sent to the gods? Don’t make me laugh, you crook.”

Ahid looked at me expressionlessly.

“What kind of god only bestows salvation of that level? Your Almighty Radiance must be nothing special.”

Ahid looked away from me and stepped inside the fixed magic circle.

“Personally, I wouldn’t mind confronting you in a holy war. However, god has not given me the divine message to do so. Regrettable as it is, I must turn a blind eye to you this time, heretic.”

“Oh? So you came up with a reason to avoid conflict. That’s not a bad front for running away. You’ve realized Arcana can’t defeat me in her current state, so you’re feeding her other gods to gain power. Is that it?”

“A heretic like you will one day face judgment. Until that moment comes, prepare yourself for repentance, Anos Voldigoad.”

He activated the magic circle and disappeared. After watching him go, Arcana reached a hand out into the space before her. A lunar snowdrop fell, and a magic circle appeared. It was Syrica—she was probably reincarnating the dead Gazel. From the looks of the spell formula, there would be no succession of memories or power, making it an entirely natural rebirth. There wasn’t even a time frame for when it would occur.

Well, if he reincarnated with his current memories, he would choose death again anyway.

“Why did you choose that man?” I asked.

Arcana answered plainly. “He was beyond salvation, and I am a god.”

So she had purposefully chosen a man that couldn’t be saved. It made sense, but it sounded like an awfully helpless situation.

“Do you know...”

“If I do know, then yes.”

Arcana looked at the pledge jewel ring Gazel had left behind. “Why do people want to become gods so badly?”

She must have been referring to people like Gazel and Ahid, along with others chosen for the Selection Trial.

“Why do they risk their lives to become gods?” she asked. “What for? Will they be saved that way?”

“Who knows? Maybe they just want power. I’d rather know why you’re asking these questions.”

Arcana thought for a moment. “Being a god has never been a blessing to me.”

I burst out into laughter. “Bwa ha ha! You sure say some reasonable things for a god, though you’ve been given the short end of the stick if you have to save a man beyond saving.”

Arcana drew a magic circle for Gatom.

“Are you going already?”

“You are an enemy.”

“Fair point.”

“I will give you one warning,” she said. “You should return to the surface soon.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“I cannot say any more.”

Was this a trap or a genuine warning?

“Because I’m an enemy?”

“Yes.”

“So why warn me in the first place?”

“Can I not save an enemy?”

“That’s an interesting thing to say.”

In that case, Arcana’s actions were probably being restricted by her pact with Ahid.

“There aren’t many gods who would say something like that.”

Magic particles rose from the circle as Gatom was activated. Arcana disappeared, leaving behind the parting words: “It’s up to you whether you believe me or not.”

§ 26. Mystery of the Royal Palace

“Should we really head back soon?” Sasha asked with a dubious look. “They could be plotting something.”

“Perhaps.” I looked over at Misha. “What do you think, Misha?”

“I can’t see the emotions of gods. The same was true for Eugo La Raviaz, Nosgalia, and Nutra Do Hiana.”

The majority of gods only obeyed their orders. In times when people were spurred by emotions, gods were spurred by order.

“But Arcana is a little different.”

“Oh? Did you see something?”

Misha pondered to herself quietly, peering into the abyss of what she saw in Arcana.

“A thirst,” she said with a sad look, “like she’s been wandering for eternity through a desert with no water.”

Gazel was a draconid of Jiordal, Kingdom of the Divine Dragon. According to the stone tablets, the nations of the underground were split according to their religions. Ahid was the cardinal of Gazel’s kingdom, making them believers of the same religion. He had sacrificed Gazel’s Selection God and his summoned gods as offerings, but that wasn’t necessarily something Arcana had wished for herself. She had attempted to save Gazel from taking his own life by keeping him in a frozen state. When he had died, she had reincarnated him.

If Arcana truly had tried to save Gazel out of kindness, then the only other god like her I knew was Militia.

“Hmm. I am curious about how things are going up there with the dragons. Let’s head back for today.”

I held my hands out to Sasha and Misha. Once they took them, I used Gatom. Our vision turned white, and we arrived below the dome covering the

underground world.

“Huh? Weren’t we returning to the surface?”

“Gatom doesn’t work well because of the dragon domain. The magical environment is inadequate for connecting the surface to the underground. It’s not impossible, but it would take time to cast. It’ll be faster to fly back.”

With that, I used Fless to enter a hole in the dome. We departed the underground world and flew up towards the surface. After a while, we were met with a dead end in the dirt tunnel. This area of the dome was saturated with magic, causing any holes to close up immediately.

I held out my hand and used Deyas to split the earth, creating a path back the way we had come. Eventually, light came into view, and the sky appeared above us. I cast Kursla to shrink myself back into Anosh and left the underground with Sasha and Misha. Before us was a single cedar tree with students gathered around it.

“Bwa ha ha! What did I say? They’re back!”

Eldmed immediately approached us.

“Hmm. Did we keep you waiting?” I asked.

“No, no, your timing is impeccable, Anosh Polticoal. Behold! The last student is about to finish playing tag!”

Eldmed pointed his cane at a Demon King Academy student in the distance. The student, who was running frantically from the dragon, had a collar around his neck. It was Ramon of the Royalists.

“AWOOOOOOOOOAR!”

He was running for his life. The sand in his Hourglass of Conflagration had already run out, so his only means of survival was to reach the tree. At his current speed, he would be able to make it just before the dragon. But the next moment, the ground burst open, and another dragon sent Ramon flying.

“Ga— Aaaaah!”

Ramon soared through the air like a ball and struck the cedar tree. The tree shook from the impact and shed its leaves. The light had left Ramon’s eyes.

“Achieving one’s goal even in the face of death... What splendid resolve! This is how a demon should be.”

A single drop of Eldmed’s blood floated into the air as he pointed his cane at Ramon. Ingall healed his wounds and brought him back to life.

“Each and every one of you passes! How splendid, wonderful, delightful! You have all exceeded the expectations of the Conflagration King. At this rate, you may even be able to take on the dragons earlier than planned! I look forward to seeing the looks on the faces of those incompetent humans at the palace. Bwa ha ha!”

Both the Demon King Academy students and Hero Academy students looked motivated by Eldmed’s words.

“That concludes today’s lesson. You’re all dismissed. Rest up for tomorrow; review what you need; and do your best! You may come to me if you have any questions.”

A handful of students started gathering around Eldmed. Meanwhile, I looked out at the field and caught sight of Shin, who was easily decapitating the dragons that had shot out of the ground.

“H-Hey, Anosh...”

Ramon came up to me.

“What’s up?”

“Master Zercean sent a Leaks saying he couldn’t get in touch with you.”

“Oh, that must have been when I was underground.”

The dragon domain would have prevented any Leaks from reaching me if we weren’t connected by Gyze.

“What did he want?”

“The guy who gave the Royalists the dragon made contact again. Only this time, he used a familiar.”

“Oh?”

“He said he knows a good way to save Midhaze from the control of the

Demon King. Master Zercean is pretending to be interested, but he still hasn't heard the details."

It was clear nothing good was going on.

"You said you hadn't seen the face of the man, correct?"

"Yes."

"Was this the ring he was wearing?"

I showed Ramon the Selection pledge jewel I had obtained at Everastanzetta.

"Y-Yeah. It was exactly like that. I think it was a little brighter than that, but the gemstone was the same."

That made sense. Because I hadn't made any pacts, there were no flames lit within the pledge jewel. If his was brighter than mine, then the one who'd given the Royalists the dragon was most likely one of the Selected Eight. But was it Ahid or someone else?

"Did he say anything else?"

"Nothing in particular. Oh, but Master Zercean said the familiar was a falcon."

When it came to flying familiars, demons preferred owls, and humans preferred falcons. However, that was just a custom—other familiars were used as well.

"That isn't unusual in itself. What about it?"

"Ah, well, he's not entirely sure, but he thinks he once saw the same falcon at Gairadite's royal palace."

After the war with Azesion, Zercean, Elio, and Melheis had visited Gairadite numerous times to negotiate with the humans. He would have stepped foot in the royal palace before.

"That said, it's not easy to tell falcons apart. Personally, I think Master Zercean is just imagining things."

"Hmm. Good work. Tell him to contact me if he discovers anything else."

"All right."

Ramon exhaled in relief and left. He was far more obedient than he'd used to be. It seemed the collar was working.

"Say, didn't he just say something kind of alarming?"

Sasha looked wary of how troublesome things were turning out.

"Have the human royals joined hands with the draconids?" Misha asked.

"We don't know for sure, but we can check. Lay."

Lay, who was talking with Misa, turned towards us with his usual smile.

"Let's head to the palace. Hopefully it hasn't completely fallen apart."

"Sure."

I called Eleonore and Zeshia over and used Gatom on everyone. We teleported right in front of Gairadite's royal palace.

"Why don't you use Lynel and Najira?" Eleonore suggested. "We can sneak in and investigate like that."

Zeshia nodded enthusiastically. "Like hide-and-seek."

"Then let's do that."

Once I'd hidden our appearances and magic, we slipped through the gate and into the palace grounds. After we'd been walking for a while, a familiar sound reached my ears, making me come to a stop.

Sasha turned to me curiously. "What's wrong?"

"Listen carefully."

She made a gesture to show she was listening. An unpleasant high-pitched screech could be heard faintly in the background.

"Isn't that..."

"A dragon cry," Misha said.

"The main building and the land underground have become a dragon domain," Lay said with a grim look. He was trying to look around with his Magic Eyes, but the domain was obstructing his vision.

"What does that mean? Is there a dragon nest right below the palace?" Sasha

asked.

“Perhaps. We’ll be lucky if that’s all it is.”

The royal palace had been extremely passive about the dragon issue. I’d thought they were just being incompetent, but it was quite possibly something even worse.

“They may be raising dragons here.”

“In the palace?!” Sasha exclaimed. “But dragons have made humans suffer before, right? Why would they risk them attacking their own people?”

“It’s just a possibility.”

“Ah, but maybe we should give up on the hide-and-seek,” Eleonore said with a serious look. “We’ll be fine if they find us, but if they release the dragons into Azesion...”

If they were raising dragons here in the palace, they could end up resorting to drastic measures when cornered.

“But we can’t just give up on going inside! If they’re really keeping dragons in there, we have to put a stop to it,” Sasha said.

It wouldn’t be a problem if we could exterminate the dragons before they were freed, but we had no way of knowing how many there were. It would be better to play it safe. After all, there was no harm in taking precautions.

“There’s a way of entering without hiding,” I said, looking over at Lay. As the Hero Kanon, he would be welcomed in with open arms.

“I don’t like the idea, but I suppose this isn’t the time to complain,” he said.

“Then let’s get out of here first.”

Using Gatom, I moved us all to the auditorium of the Hero Academy while canceling Lynel and Najira.

“Now go find Headmaster Zamira,” I said.

Lay nodded. “Hopefully he’ll show me there today.”

He made his way to the door.

“Go with him, Misa. If you say you’re his fiancée, they’ll welcome you in too.”

“Aha ha. I’ll have to make sure father doesn’t hear about this.”

Although her laugh was strained, Misa caught up with Lay, looking pleased.

“Be careful. Welcoming Hero Kanon most likely isn’t all they intend.”

Lay paused and offered me a troubled smile. “I can only hope humans aren’t that foolish.”

Together, the two left the auditorium.

§ 27. First Aske Experience

The next day.

Eldmed drew a complex magic circle on the auditorium blackboard.

“Say, Lay, how did things go with Headmaster Zamira?” Sasha whispered to Lay, who was dozing in the seat in front of her.

“He said he needed to make the proper preparations to welcome Hero Kanon.”

“What a warm reception. Will he be coming today?”

“He said he would.”

Eldmed turned to face the class. “Yesterday, you all experienced firsthand what it means to face a dragon. You now know how to run away from them, but you still lack a means of dealing them effective damage. You neither possess the skills to aim for the weak spots on their necks nor the magic to pierce their scales, which is even more the case for the students of the Hero Academy.”

He tapped his cane against the floor.

“So what should we do? What do you think, Ms. Emilia?”

Startled by the sudden question, Emilia faltered.

“What magic do heroes specialize in? How have the heroes who fall behind us in strength and magic fought against us until now?”

“Aske? Ah, no, you mean barrier magic!”

“Yes, precisely! Barrier magic! This formula here is the one humans used against dragons two thousand years ago—for the barrier spell De Jerias!”

The Hero Academy students looked dubious of the Conflagration King’s knowledge of a hero spell formula.

“Bwa ha ha! There’s nothing to suspect here. The Demon King once stole it with his Magic Eyes,” he said casually. He looked at the students. “Let’s start

with an example, shall we?” He pointed his cane at Lay. “Hero Kanon, Misa, come to the front.”

Lay and Misa stood up and made their way to the teacher’s podium, where Eldmed drew a magic circle on the floor. Green flames rose from the circle.

“These flames imitate the wavelength of a dragon’s magic. You can use them to test the effect of De Jerias. If the flames weaken, that means the barrier is effective.” Eldmed turned to Lay. “Now, if the two of you could cast De Jerias.”

“Um, I think Lay can cast it by himself,” Misa said hesitantly, raising her hand. Elmed took one look at her and burst out laughing.

“De Jerias is just like Teo Triath—it converts magic gathered through Aske. He cannot cast it alone.”

“O-Oh, so that’s what you meant.”

Lay smiled and offered Misa his hand.

“It’s kind of embarrassing using a spell like this here.”

As Misa softly placed her hand atop Lay’s, the light of Teo Aske enveloped his body. The students of the Hero Academy students began to murmur.

“H-Hey, that spell formula... That blazing magic light... Could that be...”

“Teo Aske?! No way. That’s the greater magic of legends!”

“I guess it makes sense. He’s the true Hero, after all.”

“Does that mean those two are a thing?”

“It’s not like we’d ever be able to use magic like that in our lifetimes, anyway.”

“Tsk. Show-offs!”

Lay and Misa’s love combined into one and converted into a vast amount of power. But the trump card of a hero, Teo Aske, was a little different than usual.

“What a pathetic amount of magic,” Shin mumbled quietly.

“Did you say something, Mr. Shin?”

“No, nothing.”

Eldmed cackled.

“I’m actually not that good at barrier magic,” Lay said as he drew a magic circle in front of himself. “*De Jerias*.”

A thread of magic appeared and split infinitely, encircling the green flames. A loud screeching noise filled the room as the flames were extinguished in no time at all.

“Splendid! As expected of Hero Kanon—you’ve put the flames out completely! It’s no wonder you could face the Demon King so many times and live to tell the tale!”

Lay pointed at the magic circle on the blackboard. “It’s thanks to that, I think. The formula is much better than the one humans used to use. It’s much more efficient magicwise.”

“Yes, that’s right! The original spell was terribly inefficient, so the Demon King rewrote it to make it stronger and easier to use. Oh, there’s no need to be surprised. That’s just what happens when you show Anos Voldigoad a spell.”

Having concluded his praises, Eldmed addressed the whole class. “Now, those of you with superior Magic Eyes might have noticed already, but *De Jerias* restrains dragons by means of the power of sound. The magic thread winds around the body of the dragon, tightening the more the dragon struggles. It then releases a loud noise and seals the dragon’s magic.” Eldmed looked at Emilia. “Do you know what that means, Ms. Emilia?”

“When the dragon moves, *De Jerias* interferes with its magic, sealing it with sound. Therefore, the stronger the dragon is, the stronger the barrier has to be. Is that right?”

“Precisely! That’s why most dragons can be rendered powerless by enclosing them in the barrier. That being said, there is a catch. The dragons you saw in the field yesterday were all juveniles. Even students such as yourselves can take on dragons of that level, but be careful. The older the dragon, the harder they are to restrain.”

The Conflagration King pointed his cane at the blackboard. A picture of a dragon appeared there. Unlike the dragons from yesterday, this one had deep

green skin and scales.

“Older dragons such as these are called ancient dragons. Their scales and skin are a deep green color, and they cannot be restrained by De Jerias. You must risk your lives to behead them.”

Suddenly, Eldmed beamed in delight. “Oh, and one more thing. You’ll probably never encounter one yourselves, but there are also rare varieties with different-colored scales. Those dragons are known as variants, and if you encounter one, there’s only one way to deal with it.” Eldmed lowered his voice in warning. “Run for your lives.”

He drew another magic circle that burned with green flames. “Now that you’ve seen an example, it’s time to try De Jerias out for yourselves. Go on, Ms. Emilia.”

“Huh?” Emilia shot Eldmed a bewildered look. “But I’m a demon. I can understand the spell formula, but I can’t use it myself.”

“Bwa ha ha! If hero magic could only be used by humans, the Demon King wouldn’t have been able to rewrite it.”

“That may be true, but I can’t...”

Emilia hung her head. Eldmed approached her and peered at her face from the side.

“Ms. Emilia, you were cursed by the Demon King of Tyranny and lost your original royal form. Your magic has also weakened.”

The students stirred at his words.

“Huh? Is Ms. Emilia the same Ms. Emilia that used to teach our class? The Royalist Emilia?”

“But isn’t she completely different? Not only in looks, but in personality as well.”

“Well, anyone’s personality would change if the Demon King placed a curse on them.”

“Oh, right...”

The Demon King Academy students nodded to themselves in understanding, while the Hero Academy students stared at Emilia in surprise.

“M-Mr. Eldmed! That is irrelevant to the class!”

“Oh? Do you really think I, the Conflagration King, would bring up something irrelevant to a lesson?” Eldmed asked sharply, making Emilia fall silent. He then grinned. “Allow me to explain. Ordinarily, the magic capacity of a source cannot change through mere reincarnation. The difference in power between reincarnations actually comes from a change in how efficiently the body can use magic.”

Eldmed pointed his cane at Emilia. “Your magic might have been weakened, but it hasn’t been reduced. The problem is your body converting magic much less efficiently. So why is that? Creating a body with poor magic circulation would be difficult, so what would be a much simpler way of reducing a demon’s magic efficiency?”

“How would I know? This has nothing to do with the cla—” Emilia gasped midsentence. “By making the body more compatible with human magic instead.”

“Precisely! Most demons of this era will never use human magic, so it would feel like one had less magic overall. You are a demon, but your body is suited for using hero magic. You would be able to cast both Aske and De Jerias, Ms. Emilia.”

Emilia frowned and looked down at her hands.

“You know the spell formula for Aske, yes?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t be able to teach it if I didn’t.”

“Bwa ha ha! Only a model teacher would study formulae they can’t use themselves!” Eldmed turned to face the Hero Academy students. “Now, it’s time to begin the lesson. The citizens of Gairadite are unlikely to power your Aske. Thus, you have no choice but to support yourselves. However, there’s no need to worry. There are just enough like-minded comrades here. If you work together, you’ll be able to produce an Aske far stronger than what you’ve experienced until now.” He pointed his cane at the students. “Unite your

feelings and send them into Ms. Emilia's Aske."

Emilia drew the magic circle for Aske but struggled to activate it. "I knew it..."

"No, no, you're doing fine. Keep it up. Hero magic cannot be forced into submission—you have to imagine it wrapping around you. Forget your past magic and entrust your source to your body. It was made to cast spells like this."

Emilia closed her eyes and once again attempted sending her magic into the circle, entrusting her source to her body as she'd been told. Eldmed's advice seemed to pay off, as particles of light began to appear around her.

Albeit weakly and clumsily, the magic circle was activated. The thoughts and feelings of the Hero Academy students converted into magic, covering Emilia's body in a pale light.

"Success! You were able to use Aske after a single piece of advice. You must have quite the talent, no?" Eldmed grinned, then pointed with his cane at the green flames. "Now use the power of Aske to draw the circle for De Jerias and use it."

Emilia nodded seriously. "I'll try."

She held out her hand and drew the magic circle for De Jerias before gazing deep into Aske's abyss. Her magic swelled just a little more, allowing her to touch the thoughts gathered by Aske.

You know, Emilia's face is kinda cute. If only she'd shut up.

Really? I like her face when she's angry though. It makes me want to tease her more.

We're in the middle of Aske, so she can hear your thoughts, you know?

I thought she had a bit of a baby face, but that was because of her reincarnation, huh?

"Raos, Heine, Ledriano, what are you three thinking in the middle of class?!"

The moment Emilia turned on them in a rage, the magic circle shattered, and she quickly realized her mistake. Thus, her first attempt to use De Jerias ended in failure.

§ 28. Trampled Pride

“Now look! The spell failed because of you three hooligans.”

“Oh, really now? That’s a shame,” Raos said without a hint of guilt.

“More importantly, Emilia, you can’t employ such aggressive magic when casting barrier spells. Heroes fight to survive, not to kill. Well, we kill afterwards, but whatever,” Heine said, snorting with laughter.

“That’s Ms. Emilia to you! Just who do you think are, treating your teacher like a student?!”

Ledriano smirked. “If you’re our teacher, shouldn’t you be better at using barrier magic than us?”

“S-Silence!” Emilia yelled, turning away in a huff. It was at that moment the door to the auditorium opened.

“Good grief. As always, there isn’t a single proper class being held in this academy.”

The one who appeared was Headmaster Zamira. Soldiers dressed in formal attire stood in a row behind him.

“What? Why’s this bigwig here again?”

“Fool. No one has any business with pretenders like you,” Zamira sneered. “I happened to catch wind that you were running around with dragons yesterday. I’ve never heard of *heroes* training in how to flee. Hero Kanon always fought with his life. Do you plan on turning tail when the nation is in need?”

Raos stood up in his seat and glared furiously at the headmaster, but the dozens of soldiers behind Zamira prevented Raos from shutting him up like last time.

“If you wish to talk back, defeat a dragon first,” Zamira said over his shoulder as he marched up to the teacher’s podium. There, he turned to Lay and Misa and bowed his head like a completely different person.

“I have come to collect you, Hero Kanon, Lady Misa. There is a carriage waiting outside. Tonight, a banquet will be held at the royal palace, and we will be ready to hold a ceremony within the next few days. Please consider staying in the palace until then. We will ensure you experience the finest hospitality as a hero and the true Hero.”

“Will I be able to meet the King of Gairadite as I requested yesterday?” Lay responded without breaking his smile. “I’d like to meet the other royals too.”

“Of course. His Majesty has already been asking to see you. As for the other royals...” Zamira paused for a moment. “Ah, no, let’s get going! Come, come, this way. Let us speak in the palace instead of this dreary place.”

Lay nodded and turned to Misa. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

With that, the two followed after Zamira. The soldiers parted to make way for them, then followed Lay in reverence. They left the auditorium and closed the door behind them.

“I can’t do this,” someone muttered. It was Raos. He furiously stomped towards the door and kicked it with all his might. “Damn it! Who does he think he is?! Damn it! Damn it!”

Thunk, thunk, thunk. Raos slammed the door in a fit of rage.

“Raos, stop kicking the door! Don’t take out your anger on inanimate objects!”

Emilia stepped down from the podium and hurried over to hold Raos back.

“SHUT UP!”

Raos swung his arm with all his might, sending Emilia flying back. She pushed herself up from the floor and glared at him sharply. His strong emotions poured through the Aske that was still in effect. Intense anger swirled into an air of rage.

It’s not like anyone expects anything from us anyway. Everything we do is pointless. None of it means anything.

As the caster, Emilia could hear it all. She listened to each and every word carefully. But tracing the origin of their anger revealed that it was something more than that. It was an emotion resembling despair. They were being blamed for absolute absurdity. They could only raise their voices in anger.

Sure, we may not be perfect. We know that. But the adults are even worse than we are. We risked our lives training against dragons to be told we were running away, and in the end, we'll have to protect scum like him!

First they praise us for being heroes and for being the reincarnations of Hero Kanon. Then one day, we're told that was all a lie. Suddenly, we were being treated like trash. All we ever did was what we were told to do! We became heroes like you people wished.

Why are we suddenly being criticized for just doing what we were told? If what we did was meaningless because we weren't Hero Kanon, then everything we do is meaningless.

We're not heroes. We're just worthless fakes... Damn it. Why weren't we born as real heroes? Why?

Raos's gloomy emotions exploded from Aske, but while the words were his, the feelings belonged to everyone. The Aske magic surrounding Emilia swelled in agreement. Heine's emotions, Ledriano's emotions, and the emotions of the former Jerga-Kanon class united and were converted into power.

"What?" Raos spat. "Strike back if you want with your specialty slap. Or are you feeling sorry for us? Well, we don't want your damn pity!"

Emilia mumbled something inaudible as she rose to her feet.

"You what? What was that?"

"I said don't think you're the only ones suffering from absurdities!" Emilia cried as the palm of her hand clapped against Raos's cheek.

"Ouch... You actually slapped me!"

“If you have no intention of protecting others, then leave.” Emilia pointed at the door. “If you don’t have anything you wish to protect, then you don’t have to take this class. That goes for everyone. If you don’t want to be here, leave!”

No sooner had Emilia said that than Ledriano stood up and left. He was followed by Heine and the other students of the Hero Academy, who got up and exited the auditorium one after another. Raos was the last to leave, but he stopped in his tracks in front of the door. He turned around and looked at Emilia.

“Hey, shouldn’t you be stopping us? Aren’t we your responsibility?”

“I don’t care. Do what you please.”

“Ha. Is that so? You’re just like the rest of them, then!”

After Raos left the auditorium, the only person left from the Hero Academy was Emilia. The students of the Demon King Academy watched her with concern as she bit her lip.

“Bwa ha ha! What a sight that was, right, everyone? This is what it means to be young!”

The students were taken aback by Eldmed’s words.

“It wasn’t like this back in our time, right, Mr. Shin?”

“Youth,” Shin replied quietly.

“Um, sir, is it okay to be so unconcerned about this?” Naya asked.

“Good question, Bookworm. Unlike with demons, this is what humans need, for their trump card, Aske, can only demonstrate its true worth when their hearts are united. Humans put a lot of emphasis on outward appearances, which is why when they set that aside and finally unite their Aske is so powerful—strong enough to serve as both sword and shield against us demons.”

Eldmed stepped down from the podium and approached Emilia. “And so, conflict is inevitable. You clash with people, and they clash with you. That is how you learn more about others, which is vital for heroes who fight with their hearts. Ms. Emilia, what you just did put that into practice. You revealed your own unsightly heart and clashed with your students. Wouldn’t you say that

requires courage?”

The students of the Demon King Academy looked convinced by Eldmed’s words.

“Now, the rest of us shall fight as demons fight! Today we’ll be training in effective offensive methods against dragons. I have the perfect targets prepared in the desert to the east.”

“Um, sir, are the targets by any chance dragons?”

“Precisely! Bwa ha ha! Well done, very well done. You’re all getting so much more perceptive!”

The students sighed wearily.

“Well then, let’s get going. We can practice Gatom again today too! Bwa ha ha ha!”

Eldmed drew the required Gatom formula on the blackboard, ready for the students to copy and cast. Sasha was about to set off herself when she suddenly looked at me.

“Are you coming?”

“I’ll catch up later,” I replied without taking my eyes off Emilia.

“Don’t go rubbing any salt in her wounds, okay?”

“Do I look like I’d do such a thing?”

“I’m saying it because you do. Well, whatever.”

Sasha teleported away.

Before long, only Emilia and I remained in the auditorium. I slowly walked up to her, but she kept her head down and didn’t move an inch. I drew a magic circle by her neck and reached into the storage circle, taking out a necklace with a small bell attached.

Emilia sluggishly turned to look at me. “What’s that?”

“Oh, it’s just a lucky charm. This is a magic item called the Bell of Thoughts. It enhances the effects of thought-type spells like Leaks and is said to help with conveying your feelings to others, making it easier to reconcile with them.”

Emilia's expression softened slightly. "You're still a child after all, Anosh." She touched the bell on the necklace gently. "No teacher should ever tell a student to leave class. It's an act of neglect towards one's duties. They have all the right to be angry. Reconciliation is..."

Emilia hung her head, her gloomy gaze falling to the floor.

"But what you said was for their sake."

Emilia looked at me in surprise.

"You believe it unnecessarily cruel that a hero's fate is to protect even those who persecute them. That's why you told them to leave if they wanted to."

Emilia remained silent, but her eyes were filled with sadness.

"Am I wrong?" I asked.

She looked down for a moment, then answered. "I wasn't thinking. I shouldn't have done something I'm so unused to. There was nothing I could say to them in the end."

I waited for her to continue.

"But when I saw them earlier, they looked just like me. No, perhaps they've been like that all along. They were always like that, so they never listened to anything I said. If the adults of the Hero Academy raised them like that, then those adults are terrible people." She shook her head. "No, that's wrong too. That's just my personal resentment. I merely couldn't forgive something that resembled what threw me to the bottom of hell. I wasn't thinking about my students at all." She smiled sadly. "I'm a terrible teacher."

"I don't think so," I said. "You tried to protect their dignity. You didn't want to let them stand on the battlefield for people they didn't want to fight for."

"Now you sound like an adult again," Emilia muttered under her breath. "But I don't think that's true."

"Then I can be the only one who thinks that's true."

Emilia's eyes widened as she looked at me.

"You were a good teacher today, Emilia."

A tear rolled down her cheek and fell onto the floor. She quickly rubbed at her face to prevent any further tears, then looked forward, still holding them back.

“I wasn’t. But I think I’ll try to argue a little more. I might as well, since I’ve come this far already.”

She started walking towards the door.

“Emilia,” I called. She looked back. “You’re working hard.”

“What do you mean by that?” In spite of her words, her smile was brighter. “You should hurry over to Mr. Eldmed’s class, Anosh. Even if you’re strong, you won’t become a good demon lord if you slack off.”

“Right. I’ll see you later.”

With a light wave, Emilia hurried out the door.

§ 29. A Royal Welcome

In the Royal Palace of Gairadite, Zamira led Lay and Misa to the throne room. Seated on the luxurious throne was a skinny old man dressed in king's robes. The man's face was covered in wrinkles, but his eyes were glistening with youth.

"I have brought Hero Kanon and his fiancée, Lady Misa," Zamira announced, kneeling awkwardly due to his thick body. Lay and Misa moved to follow his example, but the king of Gairadite stopped them with a wave of his hand.

"You may remain standing. I cannot allow the great hero of Azesion to kneel."

The king rose from the throne and walked up to Lay and Misa.

"It is an honor to meet you, Hero Kanon. I am the 106th King of Gairadite, Lycius Engelo Gairadite."

Two thousand years ago, the royal capital had been the final fortress of humanity. The king that ruled the capital was the very same king that ruled the entirety of Azesion. Strictly speaking, Azesion wasn't a single nation, but an alliance of human nations. The King of Gairadite was the king that represented all of them. The system had remained unchanged for the past two thousand years. The fact that Zamira had the same last name as King Lycius meant that he was also a royal, but he couldn't have been very high in the line of succession if he'd been the one sent to the Hero Academy.

"Welcome to the royal palace," Lycius said, offering Lay his hand. "We have been awaiting this day for the longest time."

"I go by Lay Grandsley now," Lay replied, accepting the handshake.

"You might have become a demon, but you'll always be the Hero Kanon of our legends," Lycius replied. He held out his hand to Misa.

"I'm Misa Reglia," she said.

"What a wonderful young lady."

The two shook hands.

“There’s still time until the banquet. We have prepared a room in which you may relax until then. Please make yourselves at home.”

“Thank you. Would it be possible to greet the other royals?” Lay asked.

Lycius closed his mouth and exhaled through his nose. “Hero Kanon,” he said with a serious look. “Please forgive our disrespect as your host, but there is something we wish to ask of you.”

Lay and Misa exchanged glances.

“What is it?” Lay asked.

“There are currently twenty-six royals in Gairadite.”

Still knelt beside them, Zamira’s dark gaze briefly fell to the floor.

“However, they are all bedridden with illness.”

“All of them?”

“We are aware of how unsettling it sounds. We believe someone is plotting a subversion by slaughtering those of royal blood, but none of the sages can determine the cause of the illness. We believed it was a curse, but that doesn’t appear to be the case,” Lycius said with a solemn expression. “At this rate, the kingdom will fall. We can rely only on your Sword of Three Races to sever our destiny.”

“You could have relied on Dilhade’s Demon King, no?”

Lycius shook his head. “When all is said and done, we cannot trust demons. Only a select few humans in the palace are aware of this issue in the first place. Informing the king of a foreign nation is out of the question.”

Was this the true reason they couldn’t focus on hunting dragons?

“We will prepare whatever reward you wish. Please, will you save us?” Lycius bowed his head before Lay, who could only smile awkwardly.

“I don’t know how much help I’ll be, but if it’s a type of curse, I might be able to do something. Could you lead me to the sick royals?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you. We are forever in your debt.” Lycius turned

towards the throne. "It's this way."

Lay and Misa were about to follow him when Zamira called out.

"Your Majesty!"

Lycius paused and turned back. "What is it, Zamira?"

Zamira looked at Lycius pleadingly. "I have brought Hero Kanon to the palace as you wished!"

"Indeed you have. Good work, Zamira. You shall be rewarded accordingly. Continue with your efforts at the Hero Academy."

Zamira gritted his teeth. "At the Hero Academy, you say?"

"If you have any objections, speak now."

Despite being the only royal unafflicted by the disease, Zamira had been sent to work outside of the palace. Lycius evidently had no intention of Zamira succeeding the throne.

"No, not at all."

Zamira bowed his head politely, but there was a look of humiliation and fury on his face. However, the next moment, something must have crossed his mind that transformed that look into an eerie smile.

Without noticing any of that, Lycius made his way to the throne. He held his hand over it and drew a magic circle, and with a low rumble, the throne started to move. Beneath it was a hidden staircase leading underground.

Lycius led the way down the staircase while Lay and Misa followed behind him. The steps were dimly lit by magic lamps on the walls, but the passageway before them was too dark to see down. The three proceeded down the staircase for some time, but all they could see was more stairs. Considering the throne room had been on ground level, they must have ventured far underground.

The sound of dripping water grew louder as they descended. The drips gradually increased in frequency until eventually a large limestone cave came into view. Far towards the bottom of the cave was an underground lake that emitted a mysterious light. It was holy water.

Lycius used Fless to descend to the lake below. Lay and Misa followed him. The king landed on a narrow stone path above the lake and continued walking.

“Are the royals being treated for their disease here?” Misa asked curiously, looking around.

“This here is the most potent holy water spring in all of Gairadite. Only a select few people in the palace know of the situation. We cannot give the citizens cause to worry.”

At the center of the underground lake was a large, circular stone platform. Twenty-six coffins had been placed there.

“Inside these?”

Lycius nodded. Lay crouched before one of the coffins and slowly reached for the lid. Slowly, he pushed it aside—but the coffin was empty.

The moment Lay turned back to face Lycius, there came a high-pitched screech. The subterranean lake began to release a pale light.

“Lay?!” Misa screamed as an enormous dragon over a hundred meters in length emerged from the lake, accompanied by a huge wave. The dragon’s scales and skin were white—the sign that this was a variant.

“AWOOOOOOOOOAR!”

The eerie, head-splitting roar was laced with magic, which transformed it into a sticky liquid. The thick mucus of the dragon covered Misa and Lay. Lay used his anti-magic to repel the mucus, but it continued to extend and reach for him.

“AWOOOOOOOOOAR!”

Another harsh roar covered the pair in more sticky liquid, which restrained their movements.

“I was hoping this wouldn’t be the case,” Lay said. He maintained his smile as he looked at Lycius. “Why is the King of Azesion keeping dragons that attack his people?”

Lycius replied with an equally peaceful smile. “Attack? You are mistaken, Hero Kanon. This is salvation.” The Gairadite King spoke as though he were stating the obvious. “Dragons are messengers of the gods. By opening our hearts and

offering our bodies to them, we humans can become closer to the gods. We can receive true salvation.”

“Why don’t you sacrifice yourself to the dragon, then?”

“Of course, that is my intention,” Lycius said, nodding calmly. “However, as King of Azesion, I have a duty to lead my people to the gods. Once I accomplish that, I will gladly depart for the gods myself.”

Misa gasped. “Then the other royals are...”

“I have sent them to the gods ahead of me.”

“You fed them to the dragon?! Your own children?!”

“All they ever did was fight to claim the throne. They resented their own blood relatives, detested them, and waged wars against them. I have granted them salvation from that hell. After all, a king is the parent of his nation. The least I could do as a parent was to show my blood-related children love first.”

Misa stared at him in disbelief. “What is your goal?”

“To sacrifice the god of Azesion—the Sword of Three Races—and the chosen Hero to the Almighty Radiance, Equis.” Lycius smiled as though inebriated. “We received a divine message. By doing this, I will be sent to the gods and then with eternal life return to this land. With the royal authority bestowed upon me by the gods, I will become the true king of Azesion.”

Lay’s gaze harshened. “Was it a draconid called Ahid who fed you that lie?”

“Everything will be as the Almighty Radiance wishes.”

Lycius didn’t react to Lay’s words. Whether or not this was Ahid’s doing was unclear but it was extremely likely.

“Now, Hero Kanon, summon the god of Azesion, the Sword of Three Races. It is time for you to return the hand of god to the Almighty Radiance.”

“Did you think I would just listen to you?”

Lycius drew a magic circle over his right index finger. A pledge jewel ring appeared on his hand. It was slightly different to the Selection rings—the stone was a clear crystal. Lycius wasn’t one of the Eight, but he had probably received

it from one of them. The question was, who?

“O Keeper of Emotion, heed my call. Demonstrate your salvation as our pact decrees, Enes Ne Mes!”

A flame was lit within the pledge jewel. Magic circles stacked atop each other, but the gem lacked magic compared to a Selection pledge jewel. There was a limit to the god that could be summoned with it.

With an ear-piercing crackle, light gathered before Lycius. The light formed the shape of a physical body and materialized. The summoned god was a knight in armor made of mist. It had no hands, feet, or face—it was just a moving puppet of fog.

“Keeper of Emotion Enes Ne Mes governs hearts and emotions. This mighty god will be the one to test you, Hero Kanon.”

Lycius sent magic into the pledge jewel, and Enes Ne Mes slowly approached Misa. Still bound by the mucus of the dragon, Misa couldn’t move. Enes Ne Mes’s right arm reached for her head and grabbed it.

“Ah! Ugh... Wah!”

Little by little, the Keeper of Emotion’s fog arm entered Misa’s head.

“Enes Ne Mes is a keeper that dwells within emotions. Her heart will soon be controlled by the god. Now, Hero Kanon, draw the Sword of Three Races to save her. Otherwise, her heart will disappear from this world.”

Lay glared at Lycius, who was smiling calmly back at him. Magic gathered in Lay’s right hand. Just then, Misa’s Leaks reached him.

I’m fine, she said. Wait and see what happens first. He may have a way of stealing the Sword of Three Races as soon as you summon it. Besides, this person is probably a puppet himself. We need to find out who he’s connected to in the underground world.

The magic collecting in Lay’s hand receded. “Who did you receive that pledge jewel from?” he asked.

“Hero Kanon, why do you not draw the Sword of Three Races? If you turn your back on the will of the gods, your fiancée’s heart will be theirs.”

Lycius sent more magic into the pledge jewel. Enes Ne Mes's entire right hand sank into Misa's head. Her face twisted in pain.

"Now, Hero chosen by the gods and the Sword of Three Races, it is time for you to fight for the sake of the Almighty Radiance, just as you have done until now."

"Sorry, but she won't lose. You can try all you want."

"All I want? You doubt the power of the gods? Well then, chosen Hero, prepare to witness that power and regret that choice."

At Lycius's words, Enes Ne Mes's right entire arm sank into Misa's head.

"Yield to the gods, Misa Reglia."

Lycius raised his ring hand and snapped his fingers. The white dragon under his control moved, and the mucus around Misa vanished.

"Strangle Hero Kanon to death with your own hands."

At that point Lay would have to draw the Sword of Three Races. Misa's head turned stiffly towards him. She took a slow step closer, then paused. Although the Keeper of Emotion was in her head, she turned back to Lycius in defiance.

"I...refuse..."

"What?" Lycius looked shocked.

"I refuse. There's no way I would do that."

"What an impious woman. Defying the control of the gods..."

He sent his magic into his ring again. This time, Enes Ne Mes's left arm invaded Misa's head.

"O Keeper of Emotion, demonstrate your power to these fools. Show them your might, the miracle of a god!"

"You can try all you want, but it's no use," Lay said to Lycius, who turned back to look at him. "The gods can't steal her heart"—he grinned—"because I've already stolen it."

Lycius's eyes widened in fury.

§ 30. The End of Running Away

Ledon Desert, two hundred kilometers east of Gairadite.

Under the Conflagration King's guidance, the students of the Demon King Academy were attempting to cast offensive spells against the dragons leaping out of the sands. I watched them absentmindedly while keeping a close eye on Lay and Misa through their vision.

"Hmm. So it was as I suspected—the Gairadite royal palace is keeping dragons," I said to myself. "The species' reappearance on the surface after two thousand years was most likely a man-made incident."

A piercing roar rattled my eardrums. Sasha had sunk her Vebzud-stained fingertips into the scaleless neck of a dragon about to close its ferocious jaws around me.

"Die already!" she yelled.

With the dragon's source destroyed, its huge body swayed and crashed into the sand.

"So the human king is the one harming his own people," Sasha said, flicking the blood off her fingers.

"Yes, but he called it salvation. The king had a pledge jewel, so there's no doubt he has some kind of connection to the underground world. I assume he clung to the gods after the heroes failed him."

Though it was the humans who had failed the heroes first.

"Huh. So what happened to Lay and Misa?" Eleonore asked, having just returned from defeating her own dragon.

"The king has captured them. There's both a variant dragon and a keeper nearby."

Sasha gasped. "Wait, will they be okay like that?"

"Those two should be able to hold on for a while. It seems that someone is

out to steal the power of the Sword of Three Races. Lay and Misa are trying to find out who that is.”

A keeper shouldn’t have the authority to steal the sword’s power, but a Selection God like Arcana might have been able to consume the sword as an offering. Were they trying to seize its power in order to acquire an effective means of attack against me?

At the very least, one of the Eight had to have enticed the king, and unless we discovered who that was, tragedies like this would be repeated over and over again. Lay and Misa wanted to drag things out a little longer in hopes of finding the answer.

Just then, an unpleasant, high-pitched screech rang out in the distance.

“That’s a dragon cry,” I said.

“Uh, yeah. We’ve been hearing it for a while now, you know? The dragons coming out of the desert have been making the place into a dragon domain.”

Sasha turned to look at the particles of white light above the desert. The dragon domain was indeed preventing the use of Magic Eyes.

“I don’t mean the desert.”

“Huh? Then where?”

“It’s beneath the Hero Academy Arclanisca.”

The dragon was about to break through to the surface and was crying out to obstruct Magic Eyes. Once the magic field over there was too distorted for anyone to see, it would no longer be possible to use Gatom.

However, I had made preparations for that. I followed the magic link I was connected to and viewed what was happening at the other end. I could see the corridor of the Hero Academy. Sharp footsteps were clattering down it as the owner of the vision I was seeing hurried along.

“Good grief, where did they all go? They couldn’t have returned to the dorms at this hour,” Emilia mumbled to herself. I was borrowing her Magic Eyes via the Bell of Thoughts I’d given her.

A dragon screeched. Emilia came to a stop. She must have heard the cry as

well. “What was that?”

The dragon cried even louder. The sound was increasing in volume by the moment—as if it was approaching fast.

Windows rattled noisily. A quick glance into a nearby classroom revealed the chairs and desks shaking where they stood.

“An earthquake? Eek!”

Suddenly, Emilia lost her balance and dropped to the floor. She tried to stand up again, but the shaking was too intense for her to move.

“What? This can’t be an earthquake!”

The rumbling grew louder as the trembling grew more and more intense. The ear-piercing screeches started shattering glass windows one after another.

The next moment, the ground exploded, tilting the whole academy. The sudden change in angle sent Emilia sliding across the floor.

“Wah!”

She crashed into a wall and came to a stop.

“What was that?”

Once the tremors settled, she struggled to her feet. She looked out through the broken windows to see a huge eye glaring back at her. It belonged to a dragon easily over one hundred meters long. On top of that, it had red scales and red skin.

“A variant...”

“If you encounter one, run for your life.” Eldmed’s words must have crossed her mind, as she began sprinting down the corridor. But after running for a while, she stopped in surprise and cautiously approached a broken window again.

Through it, she could see the hole the red dragon had leaped out of. Countless pieces of rubble were scattered across the ruined ground—and partially buried beneath them were students in scarlet uniforms. The students appeared to be stuck between large pieces of rubble, unable to move. Some of

them were unconscious.

“Damn it. All right, big guy, just try me!”

Emilia’s eyes widened. The students on their feet were attempting to face the giant variant. Raos, Heine, and Ledriano had put up a barrier and drawn their holy swords.

“I’ll kill you no matter what!” Raos roared. Clearly, he was putting up a bold front. His legs were shaking. Heine and Ledriano had similar looks of fear on their eyes. But for some reason, they weren’t running away. Perhaps it was because of their comrades behind them. Perhaps it was because Zamira had made fun of the thought of heroes fleeing. Or perhaps they had already given up. A multitude of things restrained their feet, preventing them from running.

“GROOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAH!”

The deafening roar rang shrilly through the air, freezing Ledriano and the others in place. The dragon opened its maw and extended its neck to snap at them with its fierce fangs, but a black ball of fire came flying in from the side. The Gresde Emilia had cast scorched the red dragon’s face.

“Save the buried students and run!” she yelled, flying out of the window while casting a barrage of Gresde at the dragon below. She had caught the beast by surprise, but she wouldn’t be able to hold it off for long.

However, the students didn’t move a muscle.

“What are you doing?! Hurry!”

“We can’t...” Raos mumbled.

“What?!”

“I said we can’t! There’s nowhere to run! This is Arclanisca, the Hero Academy of Gairadite! Where do you want us to run?! If we run here, we’re done for! Heroes can’t run!” he yelled.

“All right, here goes,” Ledriano said with a look of resolution on his face. “I’ll go first. If Gavuel works against that thing, the rest of you follow my lead.”

Gavuel was a spell that forcefully released all the magic within one’s source to create an explosion of light. It was the forbidden spell of a hero—the self-

sacrificial magic the ten thousand Zeshias had once attempted to use.

“Don’t lose your nerve, Ledriano,” Heine said.

“Yes, I know. I am but a fake, after all. But this is a path Zeshia once walked, and so, it is our duty to walk this path too.”

Hmm. Perhaps it was time to save them. However, the moment I considered doing so, a black fireball flew towards the three of them.

“Whoa!”

Engulfed by the flames of Gresde, the three students hopped quickly away.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing, Emilia?!”

“Those burns should give you enough of an excuse to run! Just say that your teacher ordered you to leave against your will! No one will blame you for it!”

Emilia continued burning the ground, leaving no room for the students to stand.

“If you don’t save the others soon, they’ll burn to death! You may be helpless against the dragon, but you don’t want to be killed by me, do you?! If you’re a hero, save them!”

“AWOOOOOOOOOAR!”

The red dragon opened its maw and released a ball of flame at Emilia. The attack was a little weak for a dragon, but that was because it was trying to eat her rather than kill her. A dragon’s breath at its true power wouldn’t even leave ashes behind. Not even a dragon could eat the source of nothing.

Emilia dodged the weak fireball and used Fless to lure the dragon towards her. The dragon gave chase, destroying portions of Arclanisca with its huge body. Since she was the only one to counterattack, it had decided on her as a target.

“AWOOOOOOOOOAR!”

With another great roar, it released a barrage of fire. Ten times the number of fireballs as before shot towards Emilia, and with no means of escape, she was engulfed by the flames.

“Ayaaaaaah!”

Emilia’s Fless was disturbed, sending her falling through the air. The red dragon waited below her with its jaws open wide.

“It’s not over yet!”

While falling, Emilia used all of her magic to draw a magic circle and cast Fless once more.

“Come and get me!”

She shakily took off for the sky. If the dragon truly perceived her as its prey, it should spread its wings and follow her. Once that happened, she would be able to buy time and minimize the damage done to the students on the ground. The Bell of Thoughts Emilia wore around her neck glowed faintly. Although her body was battered, her emotions were holding strong. Those emotions were amplified by the magic tool and began to overflow.

I am empty. I have nothing.

Clinging to fabricated glory, taking pride in an illusion, continuously looking away from reality... When I became aware I’d done all this, I ran.

I ran and ran from everything and eventually arrived here—at this hopelessly trashy academy filled with lazy students with no motivation. Helpless idiots beyond salvation. People who were as shallow as I was. They were me.

I slapped him and told him not to think he was the only one who had suffered injustice, but the one I’d truly wanted to slap was myself. It’s okay to run. It’ll be okay. These were the words I wanted to hear.

I yelled it to them on the spur of the moment since they weren’t running. It might be delusional for someone like me to think this, but I wanted to preserve the potential of the young people who were just like me. Even if I’m not very good at it, this is the only job I can do.

I can’t tell them to stand their ground, but at the very least, I hope they don’t end up the same as me. I hope, if possible, they can get away safely. Only a terrible teacher would make their students do what they can’t do themselves.

But I believe at the end of running away, they'll find the answer they seek.

"In the end, I could only give boring classes."

The red dragon closed in on Emilia, opening its giant maw and snapping it shut around her.

"Grrr!"

However, its fangs didn't puncture her body. Four barriers of water, fire, earth, and wind, respectively, protected her. It was De Ijelia, the barrier spell.

"Don't you dare give up, Emilia!"

Raos, Ledriano, and Heine ascended using Fless. They had surrounded the red dragon while casting De Ijelia with all their might. But the difference in strength between them was too great. If the dragon's intent had been to destroy rather than to feed, the match would have been over already.

Of course, I could go save them immediately. At this distance, it would be no trouble for me to incinerate the dragon with Jio Graze. However, that would only save lives. Right now, Emilia and her students were rising with courage and moving forward. If I interfered now, they would never stand again.

Emilia,

You've run and run all you could.

Now you've finally turned around to fight.

Fight to your heart's content.

And if possible, seize victory with your own hands.

§ 31. A Pinch of Courage

The chains of De Ijelia creaked dangerously. The dragon's fangs dug into the barrier, its ferocious jaws slowly closing little by little. Raos, Ledriano, and Heine poured all their magic into the barrier, but all that did was make the dragon's meal a little harder to chew. It was only a matter of time before Emilia would be swallowed, but that was something they knew as well.

"What do you think you're doing?" Emilia muttered in shock. Words spilled from her mouth. "Stop wasting your time and run! There's nothing you can do. You people don't need to fight for those you don't want to protect. If the shackles of a hero are chaining you here, take them off now and leave."

She was restating what she'd wanted to convey to Raos back when she'd slapped him. Perhaps she sensed this was the last time she could.

"You may be criticized for running away, and many will try to put the blame on you. But you don't need to care about what other people say. Let them say whatever they want. There's no need for you to feel hurt by the words of humans who can't understand other people's pain. There's no need to risk your lives for them."

A self-deprecating expression crossed Emilia's face as she spoke. It was as though she was recalling her past self who also couldn't understand other people's pain.

"You don't have to be heroes. If you're scared, you can run away. No matter how far you run, I will never blame you for it."

With another creak, the barrier distorted, and the dragon's fangs sank into her shoulder.

"Agh... Aaah!"

Fresh blood soaked through her clothes. Emilia was about to be eaten, barrier and all.

"Forget about Gavuel! I don't know who taught you that spell, but no school

should have made you learn such a thing. Whoever taught that to you was no teacher.”

In order to remove as many of their restraints as possible, Emilia chose her words carefully. She believed they would leave her behind if she did.

“Now hurry! Do as you’re told for once! Save yourselves because that’s...” Emilia paused and bit her lip. “That’s the only thing I can teach you.” She looked at the three of them and yelled. “Now run! You all still have futures ahead of you! Let me do something as a teacher at least once in my life!”

“Shut up!” Raos and the others yelled as they flew towards the dragon.

The barrier was crushed, but the dragon’s jaws didn’t completely close. Just before they snapped shut, Raos, Heine, and Ledriano leaped into its mouth and stuck their holy swords into its flesh to keep it open.

“What do you mean ‘do something as a teacher’?” Raos yelled, the Sword of Holy Inferno clutched in his hands. “Don’t go acting like our teacher when you’ve only been here a week!”

“What do you think you’re doing? All my efforts will be wasted like this!” Emilia cried.

“That’s such a mean thing to say, Emilia,” Heine said. He had Zere, Sword of Sacred Land, and Zeleo, Sword of Sacred Earth, stabbed through the top and bottom of the dragon’s mouth. “To think you’d act like that after we went through all that trouble to protect you.”

“Stop being ridiculous! The three of you will end up eaten as well! You know that!”

“Yes, we most likely will,” Ledriano replied. With Bailamente, the Sword of Holy Harbor, Ledriano constructed a barrier within the dragon’s mouth. However, the situation was no better than before. Emilia would be swallowed as soon as the barrier broke—this time, with the three students.

“Do you still not get it?! Does the Hero Academy not teach you anything?! By risking your lives to protect people you don’t want to protect, you’re just being used! There’s no need for any of that. Just go already! You can still make it!”

As Emilia scolded them, the three heroes focused on channeling their magic into their holy swords. They made no move to leave the dragon's mouth.

"Idiots, trash... We've heard it all already," Raos muttered. A crack ran down Garriford in his hand. The holy sword was unable to endure the power of the dragon.

"The only one who's ever told us that heroes and Kanon don't matter is you!"

"That's..." Emilia hesitated for a moment, then spoke clearly. "That's just because I don't think you do in this country. It's not because I care about you all! Don't die for an awful teacher like me because of a misunderstanding! There's no meaning to that!"

"Then you can just become a good teacher!" Raos yelled. "There aren't any other good teachers in this country anyway!"

Cracks ran down Heine's Zere and Zeleo. The two blades were on the verge of snapping at any moment.

"There's only scum here," he said. "This country is more rotten than you think. You may have been a piece of trash that could only think of yourself, but the teachers of this country are all worms that shoved their responsibilities onto its students!"

Dull cracking sounds could be heard coming from Bailamente. Ledriano opened his mouth with a grim look. "After the battle with Dilhade, you were the only teacher odd enough to claim the responsibility of the students as your own!"

Emilia turned to him in surprise.

"Just think about it!" Heine said through gritted teeth, enduring the fear of being swallowed by the dragon. "Who would want to take lessons from some wonderful teacher at this point? A piece of trash like you is just right for scum like us."

"It's like Heine says. We were fakes. On top of that, we're stupid, short-tempered, and take out our anger on others. We're hopeless failures." Raos stood firmly and put more strength into his arms, mustering the rest of his energy. "But even then, the last thing we want to become is like the filthy

adults of this country! We can't abandon our comrades and run away, even if it costs our lives! We're not that rotten yet!"

Raos tried with all his might to pry the dragon's maw open, but Garriford snapped. Somehow, he managed to support the dragon's palate with the broken sword.

"Damn it! Can't we do anything about this, Ledriano?! We really will be eaten at this rate!"

Ledriano frowned. One last option remained.

"Let's use De Jerias. That's our only chance of winning."

"That sure sounds great and all, but the moment our sword barrier weakens, we'll be swallowed whole. What can we do?" Heine asked.

"There's one of us with their hands free, isn't there? Someone who just practiced De Jerias earlier..." Ledriano replied, looking at Emilia. "Right now, I'm receiving the effects of Asura from the students on the ground. Their emotions are being converted through Aske."

If they didn't do something about this dragon, everyone would die. That one united fear was enhancing Ledriano's magic and allowing him to keep up the barrier against the dragon's attack.

"I will transfer those emotions to you, Emilia, so that you can use Aske. If all goes well, De Jerias should succeed."

Without the power of Aske, Ledriano would only be able to keep the dragon's fangs at bay for a few moments. Although Emilia knew the spell formula for De Jerias, she had never succeeded at casting it. But either way, they couldn't just stand around idly. They had to risk everything in those few moments.

"Me...and the students of the Hero Academy...?"

They had to unite their emotions. It wouldn't be easy.

"Don't worry. It might sound funny, but we're just as scared as you are." Ledriano offered her a faint smile. "Although we were called heroes, we didn't have any courage at all. Our teachers came and went one after another. We figured you wouldn't stay for very long either, so we didn't bother listening to

you from the beginning.” He let go of his holy sword and reached for Emilia. “You risked yourself to save us, so we’d like to trust you just this once. Perhaps there’s a pinch of courage to be mustered from us fakes as well.”

Frightened, Emilia stared at his hand, but before she could make her decision, Heine’s holy swords broke with two loud snaps.

“Hurry up already!” Heine yelled. “There’s no other choice, is there?! If we survive this, we’ll take all your classes seriously—just *move!*”

Emilia snapped to her senses and took hold of Ledriano’s hand. Then she yelled at the top of her lungs at them and the Hero Academy students they were connected to. “Please, please give me one more chance to teach you all! I will prove to you that none of you are hopeless!”

The Bell of Thoughts hanging from Emilia’s neck glowed brightly. The magic item was amplifying the power of her thoughts. The next moment, the students’ emotions flowed through Ledriano and into Emilia’s Aske, amplified by the Bell of Thoughts. Emilia drew the magic circle for De Jerias. With a look of determination, she sent her strength into her legs and dived into the back of the dragon’s throat.

De Jerias was a barrier of sound. That sound would have a greater effect when echoing directly inside the dragon’s body. But dragons ate sources. Even with her curse, Emilia wouldn’t be able to reincarnate if she were digested in the dragon’s stomach. Would the dragon be sealed, or would she disappear first? Her life would be decided by her and her students’ emotions.

I thought I’d finally done it.

After running for so long, after making so many mistakes, I thought I understood their feelings more than anyone.

I’m shallow, foolish, and worthless, but that’s why I can understand their pain so well. Their suffering, their sadness, their pride... I know it like the back of my hand. I can’t do anything ambitious like leading the way, but I hope to walk alongside them.

With a pinch of courage, I’ll carry this great sin with me and walk forward step

by step. So please...

“De Jerias.”

A magic thread flowed from the magic circle Emilia had drawn, splitting into countless branches that wrapped around the red dragon’s internal organs. Every time the dragon tried to move, every time its organs pulsed, the threads screeched loudly and sealed the dragon’s magic from the inside.

From inside its body, Emilia felt the dragon sway. It had lost the power to fly and was falling to the ground. She clenched her eyes shut at the sensation.

The collision was accompanied by a thundering crash that could be heard even from within the dragon’s body. The impact rattled her frame.

“Gah...hah!”

An intense pain shot through her, and blood spurted from her mouth. But she was alive. The light of Aske was gently enveloping her to protect her.

Emilia braced herself. The dragon showed no sign of moving. The stomach that was meant to digest her source had fallen completely silent due to the De Jerias stretched inside its body.

Emilia picked herself up and used Fless to escape. However, she arrived at a dead end—the dragon’s maw was shut tight. No matter how hard she pushed, it wouldn’t budge at all.

Just then, loud banging could be heard outside.

“Damn it. Open up! Open, you stupid thing!”

“What was that?! That show-off! If she dies here... If she dies here, I won’t be able to sleep at night!”

“Hey, Ledriano, she’s still alive, right? She isn’t dead yet, right?!”

“Of course not! The dragon has ceased to function. We can definitely save her! Definitely!”

A holy sword wedged its way into the closed mouth.

“Lend me a hand, you guys! We’re going to pry this open together!”

Using that narrow opening, the students wrenched the dragon's mouth open. Light streamed inside. Emilia's eyes widened as she caught a glimpse of the outside world. Then, once the gap was wide enough for a person to fit through, she saw the faces of three heroes.

"Emilia!"

Their uniforms were tattered, and there were tears in their eyes. Emilia slowly climbed out of the dragon.

"Jeez, you worried us for nothing!"

"Honestly, talk about making a fuss."

Emilia ignored Heine and Raos's mocking words and grabbed them as they wiped their tears, holding them tightly.

"Hey, what the..."

"You don't have to—"

Heine and Raos tried to shake Emilia off, but when they saw the tears streaming down her face, they stopped struggling and let her hug them.

"Don't be stupid. There was no way I'd die and leave hopeless students like you lot behind."

Ledriano pushed up his cracked glasses. Heine and Raos had faint smiles on their faces as the other students of the Hero Academy rushed up from behind them, cheering.

§ 32. Battle of Pride

The Hero Academy Arclanisca.

In the auditorium half destroyed by the variant dragon, students in scarlet uniforms gathered together. A magic circle appeared as I teleported into the room, followed by Eldmed, Shin, and the Demon King Academy students.

“Bwa ha ha! Looks like you were all beaten up rather thoroughly,” Eldmed said after seeing the disastrous state of Arclanisca. The ceiling of the auditorium was caved in, and the blue sky was visible. Through the large holes in the wall, the huge variant could be seen lying on the ground. “But to think you all defeated a variant! And what was it again? You did it by diving into its mouth and casting De Jerias from the inside, right? Bwa ha ha, that’s sheer madness!”

After being defeated by De Jerias, the dragon had been completely sealed with layers upon layers of barrier magic using water transported from the holy lake. Eldmed took an Hourglass of Conflagration from his top hat and used it to curse the red dragon. Once the sand finished falling, the dragon would die.

He turned to observe Emilia and the students, then burst out laughing again. “The moment I took my eyes off you, you all became full-fledged warriors. That sure brings back memories. It’s been two thousand years since I spent time with humans!”

Eldmed tapped his cane against the floor and leaned against it.

“Help! There’s an emergency!”

Following the anguished cry, the chubby Headmaster Zamira ran into the auditorium in a panic.

“Listen up! A palace familiar just confirmed that a flight of dragons has emerged from the Enora Meadow and are headed straight towards Gairadite! You must intercept them immediately, or the capital will be destroyed!”

Although the students shot him a cold look for wailing loudly, they seemed genuinely concerned by the mention of more dragons.

“This is a national emergency! The Hero Academy Arclanisca has received an edict from the king. The students of the Hero Academy are to risk their lives and serve as shields of the nation! While you lot are buying time, the royal palace will prepare the army against the dragons. Not a single dragon is allowed to enter the capital before then! Do you hear?!”

The Hero Academy students didn’t respond. In fact, they looked away from Zamira, ignoring him completely.

“What is with that sulking attitude? Don’t tell me you’ve all lost your nerve. What kind of hero doesn’t have the courage to die? It’s a well-known fact that you cowards and that previous headmaster were plotting to overthrow this country. Have you forgotten how the royal palace gave you criminals amnesty for that?!”

The students still didn’t look at Zamira, so he stamped his feet angrily.

“Fools! This is a royal edict! Be useful to the kingdom for once!”

Emilia glared at him. “Enough of this already. We won’t be listening to you.”

Zamira shot her an unpleasant look. “That isn’t up to you. This is an edict.”

“In that case, go tell the Demon King. It isn’t my obligation to listen to the edicts of a human king.”

“What?! Then turn tail and run back to your motherland, you coward. No matter what you do, these fools here will have to listen to the king’s order. If they refuse, they’ll all be arrested for treason!”

The Hero Academy students frowned at Zamira’s harsh language.

“Good grief. Spineless cowards, the lot of you. Are you that afraid of fighting dragons? True heroes wouldn’t feel such fear. How dare you sully the reputation of your ancestors! I would be overcome with shame if I were you.”

As Zamira continued to verbally abuse the students, Emilia reached the limit of her patience and took a step towards him.

“Oh? Well said.”

At the sound of my voice, Emilia paused. I walked slowly towards Zamira.

“Two thousand years ago, human royalty always led the fights against dragons.” I reached out for his stomach and grabbed some of the excess fat.

“Gah! What do you think you’re doing, you brat?! How insolent!”

“You were saying something about sullyng the reputation of your ancestors, no? Then, as a royal, you should stand at the front lines and stop the dragons yourself. Don’t worry, I’ll even lend you a helping hand.”

I drew a magic circle around his heavy body. Zamira paled with fear.

“W-Wait. What did you just say? What are you doing?!”

“It would be quite the walk, so I’m sending you to the Enora Meadow directly.”

“S-Stop! Stop it! Don’t do anything stupid! I will take command from here—”

I used Gatom on his obese body, and he vanished from the room. I’d sent him to the Enora Meadow.

“A-Anosh?! If you do that...!” Emilia ran over in a fluster.

“Is there a problem? It’s not like a human royal would die to a dragon even a six-year-old can defeat.”

Emilia looked at me, dumbfounded.

“Bwa ha ha! That’s quite the troublesome thing you’ve done, Anosh Polticoal!” Eldmed exclaimed, cackling with delight. “However, you are still a child. We can overlook this much, right, Ms. Emilia?”

Emilia couldn’t hold back her smile. “Right. This isn’t the time to be following up on the safety of every individual. It would be much more helpful if he were to go missing like this.”

Laughter rose from the students of the Hero Academy. The spot I’d sent him to was roughly five kilometers away from the dragons. If he was a true royal, he should be able to escape alive.

“Now, with the nuisance gone, let’s start our strategy meeting. What should we do, Emilia?”

“Huh?” Emilia turned to Raos.

“Don’t just look at us like that,” Heine said. “The capital will be doomed at this rate. If the palace isn’t ready, we have to fight ourselves.”

“We’re not interested in obeying the royal edict, but the dragons are indeed a threat to Azesion. We still wish to protect our homeland.”

Defeating the variant seemed to have done wonders for the heroes’ confidence. Not a single Hero Academy student showed any sign of fear.

Emilia thought for a moment. “Are you all prepared for this?” she asked.

They nodded without hesitation. They were choosing to fight not because anyone had ordered them to but of their own free will. Their resolution was clear to Emilia.

“All right.” She turned to Eldmed. “The Hero Academy will now head out to exterminate the dragons headed towards Gairadite from the Enora Meadow. The Demon King Academy shall remain here in Arclanisca. We cannot allow the students of an educational exchange to be exposed to such danger.”

It was an unexpected proposal.

“Bwa ha ha, so you don’t need our assistance?” Eldmed leaned on his cane and peered into Emilia’s face. “That doesn’t seem like the wisest of choices, does it, Ms. Emilia?”

“That may be true,” Emilia said without hesitation. “If we borrowed the Demon King Academy’s power—*the Demon King of Tyranny’s* power, this danger would be no danger at all. But even so, this is something we have to do ourselves. This is a battle for our pride. Even if we borrowed the Demon King’s power to rid ourselves of the dragons, they may still come again one day. We can’t rely on others every time.”

Eldmed grinned. “Wonderful. What splendid resolve! But there are about a hundred dragons out there. Courage alone won’t prevent unnecessary deaths. You understand that, yes?”

Emilia nodded. It seemed she had a plan.

“In that case, we will happily be protected as guests of this country. Oh, but just so you know, we will be getting rid of any dragon that comes close to the

capital. I, too, have a duty to protect my students.”

In other words, there was no need to worry about the capital’s protection. This would allow the Hero Academy to focus on the dragons before them.

“Thank you very much.” Emilia bowed her head, then rose and turned on her heel. She marched straight for the door. “Let’s go. There’s no time to lose. Please proceed to the holy lake,” she called to the students.

They left the auditorium together.

“Come to think of it, isn’t it strange that so many dragons suddenly appeared on the surface at once?” Sasha asked.

“I doubt they moved at random,” I said. “It must have been the work of the draconids underground.”

“What do they want?” Misha asked.

“Who knows? It could be a diversion.”

What could they want to do by diverting my attention to the dragons?

“Eleonore, Zeshia, accompany Emilia and the students. You two were originally students of the Hero Academy. Unlike if we demons tagged along, your assistance won’t hurt their pride.”

Eleonore and Zeshia nodded.

“Got it.”

“Zeshia...will protect everyone.”

They immediately began to move.

“Everyone gets carried away easily, so I’m worried they’ll die as soon as I look away.”

“Keep your guard up. Watch out for fire.”

With those words, the two girls left the auditorium.

“Sasha, Misha, you’re with me. I found an unnatural cavern beneath the Enora Meadow. There may be something lurking there.”

Misha nodded, while Sasha replied, “Got it.”

“Shin,” I called.

He quietly stepped forward from where he’d been casually listening beside us.

“I’m leaving them to you,” I said as we passed each other.

“As you wish, my liege,” he murmured, continuing through the auditorium door.

The pledge jewel bearer who had contacted the Royalists. The dragon being kept beneath the royal palace. The Gairadite King. The flight of dragons approaching the capital. The unnatural cavern formed beneath the Enora Meadow. I didn’t know which conceited fool from underground was behind all this or what they were plotting, but they were about to regret looking down on the people of the surface.

§ 33. Dragon Extermination Operation

On the bank of the holy lake, Emilia was explaining her dragon extermination strategy.

“...And that’s the plan. Any questions?”

The Hero Academy students, who had all been listening closely, remained silent. No one asked any questions.

“Then let’s get going. This is a race against time. Hurry!”

“Got it!”

Raos, Ledriano, and Heine dipped their hands into the lake and pulled out their holy swords. The magic of the lake’s holy water had restored their broken blades.

“I’ll be off first, then!” Raos shouted. He used Fless to fly towards the city.

“Show your power, Zere, Zeleo!” Heine commanded, thrusting his two holy swords into the ground. Particles of magic rose from the blades, and the ground began quaking intensely. A crack appeared in the earth and gradually widened to form a channel for water to pass through. Once the immense waterway reached the holy lake, water rushed down the channel.

“Guide the way, Bailamente, Sword of Holy Harbor, born from a drop of holy water. Now is the time to show your power and demonstrate your will!”

Ledriano dipped the tip of his holy sword into the lake. The holy water within the lake flowed with the lake water down the newly made waterway. Anyone with superior Magic Eyes would be able to see the water glittering radiantly.

“Just a little more,” Heine mumbled. The waterway he was making connected the holy lake to Gairadite city, sending holy water down old canals that normally went unused.

“All right, it’s time to break the water gate! Let’s burn it down!”

Raos swung Garriford, the Sword of Holy Inferno, down against the metal gate

of the old canal, engulfing it in holy flames. The gate was so old and rusted, it wouldn't open any other way.

“Take that! Burn to the ground!”

Under the raging heat of the holy flames, the gate began to melt. As soon as the other side could be seen, holy water from the lake rushed through, destroying the rest of the gate with the force of the current.

Gairadite was situated on high ground with seemingly flat surroundings. However, there was actually a gentle slope that allowed the incoming water to flow from the gate to every area of the city. The fortress city that had protected mankind two thousand years ago was equipped with a whole network of canals that delivered holy water to the front lines. Now they were going to exploit those canals once more.

“The path is clear! Keep going!” Emilia yelled. She immediately dived into the waterway and cast Koko to accelerate downstream. Their destination was the Trinos Plain, which lay thirty kilometers from the city. Emilia planned on forming a defensive line against the dragons advancing from the Enora Meadow.

The students of the Hero Academy were well trained in underwater battles. Their skill with Koko meant that they could swim downstream faster than they could fly. As a demon, Emilia wasn't as good at underwater combat as they were. Although she had led the dive down the waterway, the students quickly overtook her. Eleonore swam up to her from behind and offered her a hand.

“It won't be much of a battle if the teacher arrives late.”

“Aren't you from the Demon King Academy?”

“I'm a human! Well, I suppose I'm technically the product of a spell, but I'm still a student of the Hero Academy. I'm just on exchange right now. My name's Eleonore, and this is Zeshia.”

“We'll bring you along, miss,” Zeshia mumbled, offering Emilia her hand. “Zeshia was born in the water. Swimming is my specialty.”

“In that case, please do.”

Emilia took Eleonore and Zeshia's hands. The girls immediately accelerated.

"We're counting on you, Eleonore, Zeshia," Ledriano said as he caught up to them. "It would be unbecoming to arrive after the dragons had already passed through."

"Heh heh. Actually, I have a trick up my sleeve to prevent that!"

Eleonore stripped off her school uniform, revealing the Bik Inni underneath. Zeshia imitated her movements and revealed hers as well.

"What is tha— Waaaaaah!"

Emilia's eyes widened at Eleonore and Zeshia's dramatic increase in speed, but it wouldn't do for a teacher to be pulled along by their students like that. With that in mind, I contacted Eleonore through Leaks.

"Eleonore, I'm going to send magic through your body. It's a little late, but let's give her a gift to celebrate her reinstatement as a teacher."

"Got it." Eleonore turned to Emilia. "Ms. Emilia, do you have a moment?"

"Bik Inni."

As I sent my magic through Eleonore, Emilia's body began to glow. One flash of light later, her clothes had been replaced with a Bik Inni.

"What did you do?!" Emilia cried.

Eleonore raised her index finger. "It's a present from Anosh. You can move much faster with a Bik Inni!"

"From Anosh..."

Emilia looked down at her Bik Inni in embarrassment. She then shook her head, faced forward, and started swimming, testing the effects of the Bik Inni herself.

"While I don't approve of the appearance, this is amazing! If it's like this, then..." She sped up dramatically. "Hold on to me, everyone!"

After quickly passing the Hero Academy students, Emilia used Aske and connected the spell to each of the students' bodies like a rope. The three girls in Bik Inni took the lead. Pulled along with the same acceleration, the students

were able to move through the waterway faster than they'd ever moved before. They continued swimming like that until they reached the Trinos Plain.

"Damn, that's quite the number," Raos muttered, staring into the forest ahead of them. The enormous dragons would come into view as soon as they reached the other side. "I can sense their magic even at this distance."

"Focus your Aske on me. Then use Asura and make Ledriano and Raos the Chosen ones," Emilia said as she reached into a storage circle for robes to change into. Eleonore and Zeshia also changed into the spare uniforms they'd brought with them.

"Got it!"

Following Emilia's instructions, the students cast Asura to enhance Ledriano and Raos.

"I'll use De Jerias on that forest and halt the dragons' advance," she said.

"But dragons have wings. Won't they be able to take flight?" Ledriano asked.

"According to Mr. Eldmed, dragons are subterranean creatures. Their wings are designed for movement beneath the earth, so they cannot fly for long periods of time on the surface. That was how they moved when you played tag the other day." Emilia flew towards the forest while using Leaks to address everyone. "Heine, you're our last line of defense against the dragons! I'm counting on you to round them up if they slip past."

"Well, I'll give it a shot. I'm not really suited for that kind of thing, though." Heine stopped where he was and spun the two holy swords in his hands as he looked out over the plain.

"I'm asking nicely, so do it!"

"Yeah, yeah." He thrust his two holy swords into the ground. "Talk about demanding!"

Accompanied by a tremendous rumble, the ground below split apart. Heine was making a waterway for the holy water to pass through—a waterway shaped like the magic circle for De Jerias. It was huge. The outer circle spanned several kilometers, so it was nowhere near completion.

Of course, a magic circle of that scale would take a tremendous amount of magic to activate. That was why they'd drawn holy water from the lake. The entire plain would become a giant circle of De Jerias to stop the flight of dragons in its tracks. That was Emilia's extermination plan.

Nevertheless, casting De Jerias required a complex spell formula, and drawing that formula would require a considerable amount of time and concentration. Until the magic circle was completed, Emilia and the students of the Hero Academy had to hold off the dragons heading for the forest. If things went well, they'd wipe them out, but if they failed, their own safety would be at risk. However, the Hero Academy students had come prepared whatever the outcome.

It wasn't as though they felt no hesitation at all. They most definitely felt fear. But despite that, they mustered what little courage they had, shook off their uneasiness, and stepped out onto the battlefield.

From the forest, Ledriano cast his gaze over the meadow. The dragons' shadows were coming into view.

"It won't be long now," he said.

"Everyone, keep your guard up and listen closely," Emilia said through Leaks. She drew the magic circle for De Jerias across the entire forest as she spoke. "You must have heard of demon royalty in your studies. Well, I was born a royal. I never doubted my nobility for inheriting the blood of Dilhade's sublime founder, the fearsome yet beloved Demon King of Tyranny."

Every word she spoke sent a sharp pain running through her chest. That pain was conveyed through the Bell of Thoughts.

"But it was all a lie. I was just an average demon with nothing special to my name, and that truth was thrust before me by the Demon King himself. He placed a curse on me, stripping me of my pride as a royal and forcing me to live without running away."

It was a pain Emilia knew she might have to bear for the rest of her life.

"Nevertheless, I continued running. I continued averting my eyes. I ran and ran, wandering in search of a place where I could belong, and now here I stand

with all of you.”

An enormous dragon came into view. Its piercing screech reached their ears.

“But don’t worry,” Emilia said with all her heart. “This may sound unconvincing, but believe me. Although I’ve done nothing but run all my life, I won’t move one step from here. I can’t run from here.” She stared straight forward at the advancing dragons and raised her voice. “Because this is the place I belong—the place I want to protect!”

Emilia stood tall at the forefront of the battlefield. “You’re still the bad-mouthed idiots I thought you were, but there was one thing I was wrong about.” Although her words were disparaging, her tone was overflowing with affection. “You’re definitely not trash, and we’ll prove that to the rest of the humans in Gairadite together!”

The rumble of dragons’ footsteps was growing louder. They’d noticed Emilia and her students and had sped up their advance.

“Wipe out every one of those oversized lizards headed this way! I don’t plan on dying here today. Let’s make those beasts regret ever looking down on us. Let’s kill them!” she yelled. Emilia’s sentiments united their hearts as one.

“Ha ha ha! Nice speech, Emilia. That was perfect!”

“Yeah, let’s do this. We’ll kill them all!”

“Pests like that are no match for us.”

Heine, Raos, and Ledriano raised the holy swords.

“Prepare your attacks! Here they come!”

As they banded together with an earthshaking war cry, the light of Aske lifted Emilia into the sky. From there, De Jerias activated and magic threads that could erode a dragon’s power spread throughout the entire forest.

The flight of dragons appeared before them. Emilia raised her hand in front of her.

“Fire!”

At her command, the heroes rained a barrage of offensive spells over the

dragons.

§ 34. Heroes versus Dragons

A battle of life and death was taking place. The bombardment of Cyfer, Sherd, and Zertos struck the roaring dragons that charged into the forest. When their enormous bodies touched the trees, the De Jerias woven between the trunks let out screeching sounds that restrained their magic. Once the dragons fell silent, Emilia tied them up directly with De Jerias.

Nevertheless, a number of the dragons noticed the presence of the barrier magic in advance and began to emit their fiery breath from outside the forest. The flames easily swallowed the Hero Academy's magical barrage and scorched the trees. Had it not been for De Jerias weakening the attack, those on the front lines would have been burned to ashes. The dragons were destroying the forest in order to smoke out their prey.

"Tch. No you don't!" Ledriano took off his glasses. With the removal of the magic-limiting item, his power began to surge. "Protect and heal, Bailamente, Sword of Holy Harbor." He held the ocean-blue sword before himself like a shield. "*Bestret!*"

A magic barrier covered his body. The dragons' breath focused on him, but he stood his ground and endured it.

"*Rega Indrea!*" he cried, creating another layer to his magic barrier, before adding a holy curse that repelled magic that reached it. "*Liad Anzemra!*" Then he called upon his holy sword. "Defend us, Bailamente, Sword of Holy Harbor, protector of life since ancient times. Show your power and demonstrate your will!"

With the total release of the holy sword's power, Ledriano's multilayered barrier was strengthened by several tenfold.

"Rooooooooooaaah!"

He swung Bailamente in a sweeping arc, reflecting the dragons' breath. The fire burned fiercely, but the flight of dragons didn't move an inch. Their sturdy

scales and powerful magic shielded them from its effects.

“I guess that was never going to work,” Ledriano muttered.

Several dragons flapped their wings and rose into the sky. Although the sound barrier of De Jerias extended upwards to some extent, the dragons would easily be able to cross over the forest if they flew high enough.

“Hey, Emilia, isn’t this bad?! They’re going to get past us!” Raos yelled. He glared at the dozen or so dragons in the air.

“That much is to be expected! We’ll give up on the flying dragons until the holy water De Jerias is complete. As of now, they’re too much for us to handle!”

It was an undoubtedly wise decision. The De Jerias that stretched across the forest was less effective in the sky. Pursuing them would only result in the heroes wiping themselves out.

“Strange...” Ledriano frowned as he looked up at the sky. “Emilia! The dragons are circling and heading back!”

The dragons above their heads were accelerating as they spun back around. Emilia gasped. “Everyone, cast your barriers upwards! They’re going to charge!” she yelled.

The next moment, several dragons dived like a cutting wind. The students put multiple layers of barriers up above the trees, and De Jerias was stretched overhead.

Just as Emilia prepared for impact, several trees fell of their own accord, creating a small opening in the De Jerias barrier. A dragon dived through that opening headfirst and crashed into the ground with a mighty boom.

The students beneath the charging dragon were blown away in an instant. With so much force behind the impact, their wounds would have been fatal at best.

“GROOOOOOOOAAAAAH!”

The dragon that had landed in the forest began to knock down trees in an attempt to destroy the barrier. Emilia repaired it as fast as she could, but more trees were felled elsewhere, creating another opening. Dragons targeted those

openings one after another, blasting students away. The breath from above their heads was incessant, and there were still more dragons charging recklessly into the forest. It seemed they were attempting to crush the barrier through sheer numbers.

“Why is De Jerias... At this rate...”

The dragons began to overwhelm them as more students were forced out of combat. Once enough students had been knocked out, the group would be unable to maintain the barrier. Emilia was growing frustrated.

“It’s not over yet! Humans won’t lose against dragons!” Eleonore called. She was floating within a bubble of holy water. Countless magic runes covered the surface—she had activated her spell. A faint light surrounded the defeated students. *“Teo Ingall.”*

Soft, warm light filled the forest. The dead Hero Academy students were revived.

“Time for some support magic! Here goes!” Eleonore called, spreading her arms and drawing a magic circle over the entire forest. *“Eorunes!”*

Red, blue, and green magic orbs rose from the circle and drifted slowly through the forest. Eleonore contacted everyone through Leaks.

“Eorunes helps draw out more strength from your source than you can normally use. Green lasts for 180 seconds, blue lasts for 120 seconds, and red lasts for 60 seconds, and they will draw increasingly less power in that order. However, when the effect runs out, your magic will be halved for ten seconds, so you have to be careful!”

“Why did you learn such troublesome magic? What is the Demon King Academy teaching over there?” Raos muttered as he reached for a blue Eorunes. He absorbed it as if he were using holy water, and his power rose dramatically. “Wait, this is something else.”

He started sprinting across the ground, aiming his sword at the dragon before him. “Do it, Garriford! Burn it to ashes!”

Raos moved behind the dragon rampaging through the forest and lifted the Sword of Holy Inferno into the air. His target was the weak point on the back of

the dragon's neck. Garriford's blade had barely sunk into the scaleless spot when it was set alight with holy flames, burning the dragon's body from the inside out. The dragon staggered on the spot and collapsed with a resounding crash.

"It works!"

"We're going to take turns doing this!" Emilia called. "Follow my orders on when to use Eorunes, and make sure three other students can protect you during the cooldown time!"

"Got it!"

Emilia rapidly followed up with more orders. The chaos created by the dragons diving from above had been calmed by Eleonore's Eorunes.

"*Teo Triath*," Eleonore then chanted, firing a bolt of light into the sky. However, the giant dragon flying over easily dodged the attack. "Hmm. It'd be bad if that one comes down," she mumbled.

Her attack had been aimed at a big, blue variant. It was cautiously circling in the air, observing the forest with its Magic Eyes. The dragon was over two hundred meters long and emitted magic far stronger than that of the other dragons.

"Zeshia will go."

"Not yet! We're at a disadvantage in the air, so wait until the other dragons have been shot down."

"Understood. Zeshia will be patient."

Eleonore aimed *Teo Triath* at the sky, targeting the flying dragons. Emilia continued yelling her orders.

"Ledriano, fall back! Your Eorunes is about to run out."

"Right!"

"Emilia, they're breaking through from the front!" Raos yelled. "Several are headed this way!"

The dragons were piercing holes in the sound barrier and blindly ramming

themselves against it. Trees were uprooted and knocked over in a flurry, flinging students back.

“De Jerias was broken again... But how? Mr. Eldmed didn’t say anything about this.”

Despite her concerns, Emilia continued casting De Jerias to hinder the dragons entering the forest, but every tree knocked over and every dent made in the magic circle weakened the barrier further. There was something lurking in the darkness—something supporting the dragons.

“Again?!”

Just as Emilia was trying to strengthen the barrier, the ground suddenly exploded. A giant dragon appeared from the hole. It had deep green scales and was over a hundred meters in length—it was an ancient dragon.

“Oh no...”

“Protect and heal, Bailamente, Sword of Holy Harbor!” Ledriano, with his source enhanced by Eorunes, barely managed to stop the dragon’s charge in time. “Fall back, Emilia! If we lose you, this fight will be over!” he yelled.

Emilia used Fless to retreat. “I’m fine! You fall back too, Ledria—”

Just then, the ancient dragon opened its maw and sank its fangs into Ledriano’s barrier. For a brief moment, it seemed as though the barrier would hold up—but it quickly collapsed, and the dragon’s fangs pierced Ledriano’s flesh.

Eorunes’s effect had ended. Blood dripped down the dragon’s fangs, staining the ground red. Inside the dragon’s mouth, Ledriano fell limp.

“LEDRIANO!”

The dragon was about to swallow Ledriano whole. Not even Eleonore’s Teo Ingall could revive a man eaten by a dragon.

Emilia’s Magic Eyes blazed as though a fire had been lit inside her. She grabbed the red Eorunes in front of her and charged at the ancient dragon without hesitation.

“HIYAAAAAAH!”

The ancient dragon reopened its maw and released its fiery breath. Clad in De Jerias, Emilia endured the flames and then charged towards the beast using Fless.

“Screw you! Don’t touch my student, you greedy brute!”

Still yelling, Emilia pushed back the scorching flames and leaped into the dragon’s mouth herself.

§ 35. Lurking Underground

Fierce tremors traveled through the earth, making clouds of dust and dirt rain before us. Above us, Emilia and the others were in the midst of a deadly battle against dragons. Misha, Sasha, and I were directly below them, in the unnaturally formed cavern beneath the ground.

“So, how about you show yourselves already? Your use of the dragon domain and the darkness to boost your concealment magic was clever. However...” I used *Kurst* to grow to my sixteen-year-old form and took an unhurried step forward. I reached into the space before me and clenched my hand around something. “My Eyes have grown used to it now.”

I lifted my hand and slammed the thing in it forcefully against the ground. The magic hiding the man from view was dispelled as he landed with a loud thud. The man wore robes with a pure-white suit of armor over the top—an outfit extremely similar to that of Gazel the Saint. He had to be another draconid.

“Hmm. So you’re the ones who’ve been interfering with Emilia’s De Jerias. Were you the ones who released the dragons too?”

“*Azept Deiro!*” the draconid yelled from the ground. Light enveloped his body as his magic surged dramatically. “Everything is as the Almighty Radiance wills it.”

A high-pitched screech rang from the draconid’s mouth. I released my grip and stomped on his head.

“Gah!”

“I see, a possession summon. Come to think of it, there are some dragon species that specialize in hiding by camouflage. You must have borrowed the power of one such dragon.”

The draconid immediately drew his sword and slashed at me with the strength of a dragon. I put more strength into my foot and pressed his skull down until it dug into the ground.

“Urgh...”

“Answer me. What were you trying to do, and who do you work for?”

“We are warriors of the sublime god!” the man cried. “You may take our lives, but we will never answer you!”

The next moment, black threads extended from the magic circle I’d drawn and curled around his neck, forming an ominous collar.

“Then pray. We’ll see how far you’ll go for that faith of yours.”

Nedneliaz would show him the dream of a godless world where I would kill him over and over. No matter how much he prayed, no god would appear. He would only be killed and destroyed. The pain of thousands of deaths passed through him every second.

Eventually, he woke from his dream. The draconid looked at me with a haggard expression.

“Do you want to keep praying?”

“Ah... Ugh...”

“The pain will cease if you speak.”

With a vacant look in his eyes, the man opened his trembling lips. “We are the holy knights of Jiordal. Cardinal Ahid received a divine message, an order to consecrate the people of Gairadite.”

So that man was behind this after all.

“Where is Ahid?”

“Everastanzetta...”

“What do you mean by consecrate?”

“To send them to god through the wombs of dragons, the divine messengers. They will be resurrected as fellow draconids and become holy people who serve the gods.”

In other words, they wanted to feed the humans to the dragons.

“Invaders,” I muttered, crushing the man’s skull under my foot. I let my gaze

flit around at the others still hiding in the room. “I won’t forgive you for bringing your war to the surface. You have three seconds. Resign as soldiers now, or else every one of you will fall, god and all, when I destroy Jiordal.”

The cavern was silent for a single moment. The draconids camouflaged against the earth abruptly revealed themselves. They all wore white suits of armor over their robes.

“*Azept Deiro!*” multiple voices called. Their power swelled as they summoned dragons to possess themselves for combat.

“Gairadite will become a nation of god. This was foretold!” one of them shouted.

“As the Almighty Radiance wishes!” the others chanted in unison.

“The people of Gairadite will receive salvation!”

“Trust in god and accept salvation!” they said together.

The draconid soldiers opened their mouths wide and spewed fiery breaths like dragons. Flames filled the cavern—then promptly disappeared. Sasha had glared at them with her Magic Eyes of Destruction.

“Before you put your trust in gods, take a closer look at reality,” I said, taking one step forward.

Misha glared at them with her Magic Eyes of Creation. One after another, their bodies transformed into snowflakes.

“D-Don’t falter! Trust in our god! Charge!”

“Are you all blind? Can’t you see how desperately the people above us are fighting for the place they found for themselves? They never sought your salvation. They never asked for help. They face reality head-on and resist injustice with all their might.”

Black lightning gathered around me—it was the origin spell, Jirasd.

“Gah... GYAAAAAAAH!”

“Impossible! How could magic pierce a dragon’s protective shield?!”

“Without even summoning a god... Such power can’t possibly exist— AAAH!”

Jet-black bolts of lightning crackled and swelled, striking the draconids around us and reducing them to ash.

“What kind of god tramples on the will of those actively attempting to save themselves? Some salvation that must be. No one can save them besides themselves, and they know that better than anyone.”

“The gods will soon teach them their mistake!” a surviving draconid roared. The remaining soldiers drew their swords and charged at us.

“Mistake? The gods, teaching? Ha! Ha ha ha!”

Swords thrust forward to stab my body from every direction, but the blades all snapped upon contact.

“Ack! What is this guy?! He’s a monster!”

“This can’t be! Our swords can’t hurt him even with the power of dragons!”

“What could gods with no understanding of human hearts possibly teach?” I asked. “Are you trying to tell me that gods that did nothing in their darkest moments are stepping forward to save them now? Don’t make me laugh. The crooks.”

I drew a magic circle beside each draconid and engulfed them with Jio Graze.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The black suns devoured their bodies.

“See? The gods won’t even save you, their most devoted followers.”

“H-Heretic... We are merely going to the gods. Death is not despair; it is salvation!”

“Oh? Did you think you could go to such a place after challenging the Demon King?”

I drew a magic circle and black threads appeared, wrapping around their necks. The draconid soldiers stood in a daze as a cursed dream replayed in their heads.

“You will all relive this moment and face despair for eternity. Only once you renounce your faith and beg for my forgiveness will your bodies be burned and

granted death.”

The draconids broke out in cold sweats as they stared vacantly ahead.

“There will be no salvation here. You will all die in vain.”

Several seconds later, one draconid went up in flames.

“Oh? One of your people has already renounced their faith. How pious of them.”

A second, then a third draconid abandoned their faith and begged for forgiveness in their nightmare. Their bodies burned up too.

One collarless draconid, whose sword resembled a dragon talon, raised his blade and turned to me with an enraged look. “Y-You... You’re a devil!” he cried.

I stabbed my bare hand directly into his throat.

“Guh... Haaah...”

“I won’t deny it,” I said. I placed a collar around his neck. “However, what you people are doing is no better than the work of a devil.”

The draconid before me fell to his knees before me and burned. Thus, another discarded their faith and turned to ash.

When I cast my Eyes around the cavern, I could see there were still many draconids left. They had all come prepared to conquer Gairadite.

“Misha, Sasha.”

The girls listened closely while keeping their Eyes fixed on the draconids.

“I’m leaving the rest to you. Don’t let them interfere with the surface.”

Misha nodded. The two stood back-to-back and linked hands, their attention never leaving their enemies. They each drew half a magic circle surrounding their bodies, connecting them in a single circle. Another magic circle was layered on top of that circle—it was Dino Jixes, the secret art of the Necron family. They had once been incapable of using the spell without borrowing Ivis’s power, but now the girls had grown more experienced, they were able to reach that abyss themselves.

“Dino Jixes,” they said together. Glittering particles of magic rose into the air. Misha and Sasha’s bodies merged as if melting together. A single demon emerged from within the blinding light—it was a silver-haired girl.



“Die, you monster!”

The draconids breathed more fire on command. The flames were far more intense than earlier and easily melted the earth around us. It seemed they had summoned a dragon with particularly potent breath. The fusion of Misha and Sasha started speaking quietly.

“Magic Eyes of Destruction—Magic Eyes of Creation.”

These were the Magic Eyes that could erase all attack and defense magic in sight and recreate the body with a single glance. The dragon’s breath was erased in an instant, and the draconids’ bodies were transformed into ice.

Only the divine knights who just happened to be standing out of their line of sight survived. They stared at the silver-haired girl in shock. “It can’t be. The Magic Eyes of Absurdity...”

The draconids trembled from head to toe.

“Silver hair... Evil eyes... It’s exactly as the legends say.”

More than they did their difference in power, the draconids feared Misha and Sasha’s fused form.

“You... How could you, Misfit?! You revived the blasphemous god!”

“Are you trying to command Genedonov, God of Absurdity, to destroy the underground world?! The surface won’t get away with this unscathed!”

Hmm. I had no idea what they were blabbering about. Was there a god with the same Magic Eyes as their fused form?

“Wrong person—unfortunately for you, we are no god.”

With one glare of the so-called Magic Eyes of Absurdity, Sasha and Misha turned the draconids into ice.

“Grr!”

“Gaaah!”

“O Equis, the Almighty Radiance, please send us your salvation!”

The silver-haired girl swept her eyes across the cavern in search of survivors.

“Be careful. *See you later.*”

I nodded and put my hand against the ground. “If possible, question them about that blasphemous god.”

With that, I split the earth apart with Deyas and created a path leading downwards. Using Fless, I flew down the path and headed for the underground world. It wasn’t long before I slipped through the dome and arrived in the air above Gaelahesta.

§ 36. The Melody Resounding Above

The ancient dragon let out a desperate roar as its mighty frame toppled to the ground. A faint glow escaped its maw—it was the light of Aske. The light swelled, growing brighter and brighter until slender fingertips emerged from inside the dragon's mouth.

“Open! Open up, you big beast!”

Emilia used Aske to pry open the dragon's jaws and crawled out. In her free hand was Ledriano, whom she dragged along with all her strength.

Drawing upon her previous experience against a variant, she had leaped into the dragon's maw and used De Jerias from the inside to restrain its organs. Ledriano was unconscious but still breathing. Some of the students from the Hero Academy promptly ran up to them and cast healing magic on him.

“Things are looking bad, Emilia!” Raos yelled. “Eleonore's Teo Ingall might stop us from dying, but we're going to run out of magic!”

They had drawn holy water there to help them fight, but it would be no use if their own magic ran out first.

“Heine, how's the magic circle going?” Emilia asked through Leaks.

“It's over ninety percent complete! The question is whether I can use De Jerias on the fly.”

The only member of the Hero Academy who could use De Jerias for sure was Emilia, but she was a demon. Holy water was poison to her, and she wouldn't be able to cast any magic if she went near it. On the off chance that she *could*, she was highly unlikely to survive.

“After all the cheek you've given me, you'd better get it right on the first try!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know! Honestly, this isn't the time to be putting more pressure on m—” Heine suddenly fell silent.

“Heine?”

“This is bad. That blue dragon up there is looking our way. It must have noticed the circle.”

The moment Emilia looked up at the sky, the great, blue variant opened its maw and breathed azure flames towards the ground. The jet of fire shot in a straight line towards Heine and the De Jerias circle on the ground.

“Hold it off!” she called.

Two students who had stayed back to protect the circle flew into the air and cast barrier magic. “We won’t let you!” they yelled.

Magic collided with magic in a crackling burst, and a portion of the barrier froze solid.

“I’ll back you up!” Eleonore called from afar. She cast De Ijelia over the top of their barrier, but the menacing blue breath froze both the barriers—and it didn’t stop there. Its momentum shattered the barriers like thin ice, swallowing the two students and freezing them solid. The frosty breath froze over a third of the magic circle Heine had drawn on the ground.

“Damn it! It’s no good, Emilia! If we don’t do something about that thing, the holy water won’t make it!”

Emilia glared towards the sky. As long as the variant was up there, her strategy wouldn’t work.

“We’ll take care of the dragon, Ms. Emilia!” Eleonore shouted. “It’ll take three minutes, but I won’t be able to revive anyone in that time. Don’t let anyone die!”

Emilia wrapped a thread of De Jerias around Eleonore and Zeshia’s arms to protect them. “I’m counting on you. If you can bring that thing down, it’ll be our win.”

“Got it!”

“Leave it...to us!”

Eleonore and Zeshia took off running then soared into the air with Fless. Most of the airborne dragons had already been taken down by Eleonore’s Teo Triath, while those remaining had assumed a defensive formation around the blue

variant. The flying dragons promptly released their scorching breath at the two girls. Eleonore and Zeshia cast De Ijelia to avoid the flames as they approached.

After that, the dragons drew away. The blue dragon flapped its wings, sending a magic-filled wave of cold air through its surroundings. Each additional flap served to whip that air into a furious snowstorm. The blizzard froze De Ijelia and interfered with the girls' Fless.

"We won't be able to hold out much longer!" Eleonore called. "We've gotta take it down in one go!"

She tossed a green Eorunes orb to Zeshia, who touched the ball of magic and absorbed it. Because Zeshia's source was so young, she had more latent capabilities than her comrades—which meant touching the orb increased her power drastically.

"Zeshia...practiced a lot."

Zeshia drew ten magic circles in an arc over the blue dragon's back. In the middle of those circles, numerous square objects appeared—mirrors that showed Zeshia's reflection.

"This is...Regalomitein."

Light gathered in Zeshia's palm and took the shape of Enharle, Holy Sword of Light. When she held it at the ready, Enharle was reflected in the mirrors.

Magic coursed into the glass, and Zeshia disappeared from the reflections. The scenery around her also vanished, leaving only Enharle behind.

"Duplication."

The Holy Sword of Light multiplied until there were roughly one hundred holy swords floating around Zeshia. The Regalomitein mirrors reflected the swords, showing a hundred-odd swords as well.

"Do it, Zeshia!"

"Here goes. Which...is the real one?"

Zeshia thrust Enharle forward. A hundred holy swords were reflected in each of the ten mirrors, and a total of one thousand, one hundred swords attacked the blue dragon at once. The swords sliced through every part of its body.

“GROOOOOOOOOOAAAH!”

“The answer is...‘all of them.’”

Not even the tough scales and skin of a variant could withstand an assault from over one thousand magically charged Enharle at once. Blood dripped from the beast’s enormous body as its scales were torn off.

The blue dragon glared at Zeshia and opened its maw. Magic and cold air gathered in its mouth.

“ROOOOOOOOOOAAAR!”

Blue breath rushed towards Zeshia like a blizzard. She created two mirrors in front of her.

“Regalomitein.”

The dragon’s blue breath was reflected in them.

“Duplication!”

Two blue breaths identical to the dragon’s shot from the two mirrors. One countered the dragon’s breath, while the other swallowed the dragon’s body. While the dragon was resistant to its own breath, the scaleless parts of its body froze over. It let out a furious roar and charged at the magic mirrors. The moment its huge body made contact, the mirrors shattered—they couldn’t duplicate living beings.

“Zeshia, let’s finish this!”

Holy water flowed from the runes floating around Eleonore, encasing her in a bubble of water. From within that bubble, she held up her hand and took aim at the dragon.

“Regalomitein,” said Zeshia.

Two magic mirrors appeared before Eleonore, one facing the other. *“Teo Triath!”*

“This is...an infinity mirror.”

The beam of Eleonore’s Teo Triath flew between the two mirrors. One mirror reflected the spell into the other, which reflected it back into the first. Teo

Triath duplicated within those infinitely reflecting mirrors and shot towards the dragon in a single beam. The beam traveled like a comet, but the dragon evaded it with its tremendous speed.

“And this...is Regalontein.”

A mirror appeared in the direction Teo Triath was traveling. The beam of light reflected off the surface and flew back towards the dragon.

“GRAAAAAAUUGH!”

The blue beast evaded it, letting out another cry, but a new mirror appeared in the direction Teo Triath was flying.

“Another...infinity mirror.”

The two mirrors positioned either side of the dragon became infinity mirrors that allowed the beam of light to bounce back and forth between them.

“One more shot! *Teo Triath!*”

The beam of light Eleonore released was infinitely amplified within the mirrors and became like a shooting star. When the blue dragon evaded the shot, Zeshia’s Regalontein mirrors reflected the beam right back. Two comets shot towards the variant over and over again.

“And now the finishing blow! *Teo Triath!*”

Immediately after the dragon evaded the two Teo Triaths, a third Teo Triath headed straight for it. Due to its huge body, the dragon was unable to make a sudden turn or stop, and it was finally engulfed by the light.

“GROOOOOOAAH!”

The dragon screeched as the two remaining blasts struck, obliterating its body with their blinding light.

“It’s...our victory.”

“Let’s clean up the rest of the dragons here too!”

Eleonore quickly turned Teo Triath on the remaining dragons in the sky.

Meanwhile, on the ground below, Emilia was frantically running through the

meadow, keeping her eyes on the sky. The footsteps of the dragons were reverberating more loudly than before. Perhaps more dragons had arrived to break through the barrier with their sheer numbers. Emilia gathered all the magic she could muster through Aske and used Griad to melt the frozen earth.

“Just a little more!”

Slowly but surely, the ice began to melt, restoring the channels carrying holy water around the circle.

“That’s it!” she yelled, releasing the spell blocking the water’s path. Holy water rushed through the channels on the ground, filling the magic circle.

“Heine!”

“Yeah, I got it! We’re almost there. Easy peasy!”

Heine lifted his hands to thrust his two holy swords into the ground. However, just before he could, a jet of blue ice shot out of the forest.

“What?!” Raos gasped.

Although the power of the attack had been weakened by De Jerias, Heine’s body was frozen in an instant.

“GROOOOOOOOOOAAAR!”

A great, blue dragon tore down trees as it emerged from the forest with a mighty roar. It was a different variant to the one they’d encountered in the sky.

“Damn it! Don’t look down on me! Heine, this might hurt a bit!” Raos jumped out of the forest and swung Garriford down against Heine’s face. “Hey! This isn’t the time to be sleeping! Wake up, damn it!”

Flames coiled around Heine’s body as Raos used holy water to cast healing magic. Eventually, the ice around Heine’s face began to crack and defrost.

“Quick—all I need is one arm!” Heine immediately yelled.

“I know!”

Raos poured magic into Garriford, melting the ice around Heine’s right arm.

“Just a little more—”

At that moment, Raos’s body went flying. A dragon had made it through the

forest and charged straight for him. The dragon's Magic Eyes fixed on Heine. One after another, more dragons came bursting out of the forest.

"Heine, I'm on my way!"

Just as Emilia was about to run to him, another blue dragon—a third one—landed before her.

"UROOOOOOAAAR!"

Ferocious claws came swinging down without mercy, flinging Emilia and her De Jerias barrier away.

"I figured this would happen," Heine muttered with vexation. "Just as I think it's going to work, everything falls to pieces. It's no wonder my holy swords gave up on me and took the side of the true hero."

He glanced at the sheer number of dragons leaving the forest and gritted his teeth. The two blue variants were enough to fill him with despair. However, there was still light in his eyes.

"Just this once, I..."

He channeled magic into his frozen arm to force it to move.

"Damn it. Move! Move, I said! You worthless—! How much longer are you going to stay useless?! Move already!"

With a dull creak, his arm shifted. Magic traveled to his holy sword.

"I beg you, my holy sword. I might not be a real hero. I couldn't be even if I tried. However..." Heine strained his arm with all his might. "I still want to save them! Please, lend me your strength! I'm begging you!"

With a loud crack, Heine's arm snapped at the elbow and fell to the ground. His holy sword flipped through the air and landed with its blade piercing the earth.

"AROOOOOOOAAAR!"

The dragon before him snapped its fangs, but he grinned fearlessly and looked down. There was still a touch of magic left in his arm—and in the holy sword.

“GO TO HELL!”

The ground rumbled as the final piece of the magic circle was completed. Thanks to the Sword of Sacred Land, holy water started rushing through the waterways carved into the earth.

“All that’s left is— Gah!”

Just as Heine was about to use De Jerias, his body was pierced by a dragon’s fangs.

“Ha ha, I knew it. I knew I’d never be good enough. Ugh...”

Inside the dragon’s mouth, he lost his strength and slumped forward.

“Damn it,” he mumbled, but a voice reached his ears.

“I won’t let your efforts go to waste.”

Heine slowly opened his eyes. “Emilia...”

Knocked back by the blue dragon, Emilia rolled across the ground. She came to a stop with her hand dipped in the holy water of the magic circle. The water was still flowing, and the spell was ready to activate at any moment.

“For someone who’s always slacking, you really worked hard today.”

Emilia’s magic traveled through the holy water, activating the spell.

“De Jerias!”

Holy water entered her body, transforming into a poison. Every time she gained magic from the water, agonizing pain traveled through her. Sweating profusely and trembling with emotion, she clenched her jaw and fought through that pain. Countless stigmas appeared across her body, some even affecting her source, but she didn’t falter in the slightest. This agony was nothing compared to that she had experienced in the past.

As though to reflect that sentiment, Emilia’s De Jerias activated perfectly. Countless threads of magic were created. The meadow was glittering. The vibrations of the threads of light acted like a musical instrument, spreading a beautiful melody far and wide. The dragon holding Heine crashed to the ground, followed by the other grounded dragons as the sound washed over

them. Finally, the dragons in the sky also began to drop, sending up large clouds of dust upon impact. The great barrier of sound spread across the Enora Meadow. The dragons were either sealed by its tune or driven back to the depths of the earth.

The students of the Hero Academy were completely exhausted. Most were injured or on the verge of death. If only one more aspect of their plan had gone amiss, victory would have slipped past them, but even so, there was no doubt this victory had been seized by their own combined determination.

§ 37. Divine Message Exposed

I reached Gaelahestra and descended in front of Everastanzetta's front gate. When I took a slow step forward, the gate opened of its own accord. After proceeding inside and down a long passageway, I came upon a round, white room with eight seats—the Holy Seat Hall. A lone man stood at the center. It was the Oracle, Ahid Alovero Agartz.

"I knew you'd be arriving soon, Misfit Anos Voldigoad," he said with a calm expression.

"Answer me carefully," I said, staring straight at him. "Was it your decision to invade Azesion? Or was it the decision of Jiordal as a collective?"

He listened without batting an eye.

"The fate of your kingdom depends on your answer," I said.

"No, it was neither of those." Ahid shook his head with a look of flawless integrity. "The dragons were dispatched to the surface in response to the Gairadite king's request. King Lycius's greatest wish was to send his people to the gods by having them reincarnate as draconids through consecration." He smiled thinly. "The pious King Lycius prayed for Azesion's salvation out of the compassion in his heart."

"Those are some big words for a man who offered him false hope of eternal life and regal power."

Ahid looked at me pityingly. "A heretic like you could never understand."

"That fool of a king is free to believe what he wants, but when did he obtain the right to force those beliefs on his people? Forcing salvation on those unrelated to your faith is an act of evil."

"I believe I have told you this already, but I will enlighten you as many times as it takes," he said. "The people of Azesion believe in our god. The holy sword blessed by the gods is the sword that chose Hero Kanon. The people worship and believe in him. Evansmana was blessed by the hands of the Almighty

Radiance, Equis. Thus, they believe in the Almighty Radiance through their Hero.”

“What an appalling excuse. Not even a child would be fooled by such sophistry.”

Ahid admonished me with a gentle tone. “A heretic like you wouldn’t be capable of reaching this level of faith. They do not believe in the Hero, but in Equis, the Almighty Radiance. It is our god that they believe in. They merely have yet to realize it.”

He spoke with a cool look, as though what he was saying was perfectly reasonable. “After accepting the faith of Jiordal, King Lycius learned this fact. As a result, he realized his people had the right to be reborn as the people of god. Whether you wish for it or not, the gods will grant salvation. The people of Azesion were merely unaware of their right to receive that salvation. That is by no means a misfortune.”

“Hmm. So you’re telling me that whether they want it or not, humans should let the dragons eat them and die.”

Ahid quietly closed his eyes. “It is not death, but salvation.”

“Arcana was right. You truly are irredeemable. It’s no wonder your own Selection God is so disgusted by you.”

Although Ahid was still smiling, a closer look at his abyss revealed the sharp look in his eyes. If Misha had been here, she would have been able to tell for sure if that emotion was irritation.

“Even those clouded Eyes of yours should have been able to see how the battle above ground ended,” I said. “The dragons you released have been subdued and bound. The humans of Azesion fought against them with their lives, rejecting your salvation. They didn’t want such a thing.”

“No. The dragons were not bound by the humans’ own will. It was the gods who guided them. Everything occurred for the purpose of salvation.”

Ahid closed his eyes once again, acting as though he was listening to something. Of course, there was nothing to be heard.

“I have received a divine message regarding your comrades in the royal palace. Misa’s heart will depart for the gods by the hands of the Keeper of Emotion. The moment Hero Kanon draws the Sword of Three Races, that blade will be returned too. Judgment will fall upon Kanon for his conceit in claiming the power of a god for himself. He will soon depart for the heavens as well.” Ahid clutched his Selection pledge jewel and began praying. “Thus, a lone dragon will lead the people of Azesion to god.”

“What a foolish thing to say.”

Ahid stopped praying and looked at me. “What is so foolish about that?”

“You didn’t know the Hero Kanon of two thousand years ago.”

“I received a divine message,” he said with a laugh.

“In other words, you only know from hearsay.”

“One’s eyes may deceive, but our god always speaks the truth.”

“The truth is what you see with your own eyes,” I said. “Humans believe in Hero Kanon because he fought for their sakes, protecting everything within his reach over and over again without any consideration for himself, even if that meant his own body was reduced to ashes.”

Looking back on it now, I could still recall his fierce spirit.

“And you say that was the work of the gods? That humans believed in your god through Kanon? Don’t make me laugh. The humans back then had no faith in the gods. I murdered many of them so brutally, they were incapable of believing in such things. There was only one man who became their shield and hope, and that was Hero Kanon.”

Ahid closed his eyes and said dismissively, “And that was the work of the gods.”

“Oh? So Gairadite, Veroniez, and Nadelonica were all protected through the work of the gods? Hero Kanon never mentioned such a thing.”

“Indeed they were. The gods gave the heroes the divine message to protect them all. Even if they weren’t aware of it, that is what happened. As someone who doesn’t believe in god, you would never understand.”

A chuckle escaped my lips. That chuckle eventually grew to an unstoppable belly laugh.

“How pitiful. There’s nothing to laugh about.”

“No, Ahid. You should laugh too—it’s rare to come across something so funny. After all, both Veroniez and Nadelonica were destroyed by my own hands. Not a single soul was left alive after I’d wiped the two cities off the map.”

Ahid’s mouth snapped shut.

“So your god sent the heroes a divine message and yet they still perished? Perhaps the Almighty Radiance is no match for me. Or perhaps”—I stared straight at Ahid—“you were making up nonsense this whole time and accidentally slipped up.”

“You wouldn’t be able to comprehend the sublime will of our god,” he said, still spouting his usual strained excuses.

I glared at him sharply. “So why weren’t they saved?”

Ahid didn’t answer. He seemed to be treading more carefully after his earlier slipup.

“That era was hell. You had to kill even if you didn’t want to. You had to destroy before you were destroyed first. If this Almighty Radiance truly exists, why didn’t your god save us?”

“Those who were meant to be destroyed were destroyed. Those who were meant to be saved were saved. All is as according to the Almighty Radiance’s will.”

“What an arrogant god. An almighty being who chooses not to save all they can is rotten at heart,” I replied. Although I tried to restrain myself, anger naturally filled my voice. “You know what it is that I cannot forgive, Cardinal? The way the salvation you speak of mocks those trying desperately to survive and those who already failed trying. The deaths of my subordinates—and of the heroic souls who faced me—cannot be brushed off as the whim of a god.”

This man’s insistence that everything was the work of the gods desecrated those who had desperately tried to live.

“Emilia and the students of the Hero Academy placed their lives and their pride on the line to defend their homeland. If they weren’t moving of their own free will, if they were being controlled by god as you say, then what was that battle even for?” I spat my words at him, exposing his deceit. “Their life, their past deaths, the salvation they seized, and the mistakes they’ve made—none of those things were controlled by a god. We grasped everything with our own hands.”

Not one part of their fierce battle had been the work of the gods. They had won that victory for themselves. There was absolutely no doubt about it, and I wasn’t about to let the gods take the credit.

“Can you hear me, Lay, Misa?” I said, connecting us through Leaks. “There’s been another divine message. Apparently, Misa’s heart will depart for the gods by the hands of the Keeper of Emotion, and the Sword of Three Races will return the moment Hero Kanon draws its blade. Judgment will be given to Kanon for his conceit in claiming the power of god for himself, and he will depart for the heavens too. Now, show them reality.”

After completing my message, I pointed lazily at Ahid. “You’re a foolish crook, Ahid Alover Agartz. Killing you will be easy, but before I do, I’ll unmask the truth of your so-called divine messages.” I made my declaration directly to his indifferent face. “The Almighty Radiance brings no salvation to this world. The voice in your head is fake.”

§ 38. Royal Dragon

Beneath the royal palace, a message echoed through the limestone cave.
“Devout follower Lycius.”

“Oooh!” Lycius fell to his knees in reverence at the sound of the voice and offered up a prayer.

“Now is the time to fulfill the divine message. Retrieve the Sword of Three Races from the hero who has claimed our god’s power for himself.”

The words belonged to none other than Ahid, who was communicating via Leaks.

“As the Almighty Radiance wishes,” Lycius replied. “I shall retrieve the Sword of Three Races and offer it to our deity, Arcana, no matter what.”

He got to his feet and turned to glare at Lay, who was restrained by the dragon’s mucus, and Misa, who was covered in a fog.

“Have you come to a decision, Hero Kanon?” he asked, holding up the pledge jewel ring on his hand. The fog surrounding Misa glowed brighter. The Keeper of Emotion’s divine body was almost completely inside Misa’s head. There was only ten percent left to go. “This girl has resisted for a surprisingly long time, but she is no match for the order of a god. Once Enes Ne Mes’s body completely enters her mind, she will be lost. I advise you draw the Sword of Three Races before then.”

Lay looked at Misa for a moment. She was still struggling desperately against the Keeper of Emotion.

“Your duty is over, Hero. The Sword of Three Races seeks a new master. It is time for you to obey the will of Equis. You know what will happen if you don’t, yes?”

Lay beamed cheerfully in response to Lycius’s threats. “I’ll tell you as many times as it takes: not even the god that governs emotions can take our love away from us.”

“Kanon,” Lycius said coldly. The anger he felt from having his god scorned was clear in his eyes. “You speak of love? Your vanity has gone too far! All of our hearts belong to the gods. It was Enes Ne Mes who bestowed you with that love!”

Magic gathered in the pledge jewel. Lycius gave the Keeper his order.

“O Keeper of Emotion, retrieve the love you bestowed upon these arrogant souls.”

The fog glowed brighter than ever, then disappeared into Misa’s head. A fog gauntlet appeared around her right arm, followed by one around her left. A fog helmet appeared over her head, and a breastplate materialized around her body. It was as though the Keeper of Emotion was controlling her body through its armor of fog.

“Now, Enes Ne Mes, use your power to pass judgment upon Hero Kanon for his betrayal of the gods.”

Restrained by the dragon’s mucus, Lay looked over at Misa.

“Foolish man,” Lycius said. “Your stubborn refusal to draw the Sword of Three Races has resulted in your lover losing her heart. She has been punished for the karma you incurred. Now atone for your sin.”

As slowly and stiffly as a puppet, Misa walked up to Lay and brushed her hand across his cheek. “Say, Lay,” she said, “are you able to love me after I’ve changed so much?”

“Misa?” Lay stared at her, surprised.

“Hee hee. Do you finally understand, Kanon? You might have been the legendary Hero two thousand years ago, but without the guidance of the Sword of Three Races, you’re nothing.” Misa leaned closer and lifted the visor of her helmet. “Now answer me. I am no longer Misa. You can’t love someone like me, can you?”

Lycius nodded in satisfaction. “This is reality, Hero Kanon. To defy the will of Equis with the power of love is like an ant challenging an elephant. Accept your fate, and return the Sword of Three Races.”

“No,” Lay said. He continued staring at Misa. “You are Misa. I’ve said it before—I won’t change my mind over how you look or what you say. As long as you are you, I will love you.” He looked through the crack in the helmet and into Misa’s eyes. “This is the first time you’ve shown me your true form, isn’t it? You’re cute like this too.”

King Lycius furrowed his brow dubiously. “What nonsense is this? I see you’ve finally lost your mind.”

“You pass,” Misa said.

“That’s right, he— Wait, what?”

Black lightning surged from the palm of Misa’s hand, ripping apart the dragon mucus around Lay. She had used Jirasd to free him.

“O Keeper of Emotion, Enes Ne Mes, what is happening?!”

Misa slowly turned back to glare at Lycius, bringing her fingertips to her chest. “I have seized command of this Keeper. Keeper of Emotions or not, no god could hope to stand a chance against me within my own body.”

Lycius looked at Misa in disbelief. “What lies! Enes Ne Mes, the god that governs the order of emotion would never...”

“How odd. It’s true that this god governs anger, sadness, happiness, and delight, but they’re awfully weak in regards to kindness and love.”

“Y-You dare ridicule the gods! Enes Ne Mes governs *all* emotions. The gods don’t know the meaning of ‘weak’!”

Misa smiled gently, making Lycius tremble in confusion. “Even if that were the case, what about it? Did you not watch the Demon King Reordination Ceremony, King Lycius? Or did you think my existence was a lie to benefit Dilhade?” She lifted her hand and removed her helmet. Her long, ocean-blue locks fluttered free. “I am Avos Dilhevia, the phony Demon King that destroys gods.”

Misa’s helmet rolled across the ground. She crushed it underfoot, dispersing the fog.

“That being said, now that I’ve reincarnated, I am no more than a simple girl

in love.”

Lycius jumped back in fear. “Gah! R-Return to me, Enes Ne Mes! Get away from that monster!” he yelled.

The armor of fog around Misa scattered, revealing her midnight-black dress. Six spirit wings appeared at her back as though they had been freed from their restraints.

The scattered fog gathered before Lycius, forming the full suit of armor once again. The destroyed helmet was also restored.

“It seems a more severe punishment is needed for you both.” Lycius raised his ring and shouted, “O Enes Ne Mes, now is the time to bestow upon me the power of the Royal Dragon!”

The Keeper of Emotion transformed into glowing mist that enveloped Lycius. He now wore the suit of armor.

“All is as the Almighty Radiance wishes!”

However, as he began to pray...

“GROOOOOOOOAAAH!”

The variant dragon let out a fierce roar and sank its fangs into Lycius.

“Gah... Hah!”

His whole body dripping with blood, Lycius looked up with crazed eyes and smirked. “I will soon be with you, my god...”

Immediately after he had mumbled those words, the dragon gobbled up Lycius along with Enes Ne Mes.

“GROOOOOOAAAH!”

The white dragon’s mighty roar rattled Lay and Misa’s eardrums. Divine magic flowed from its huge body, which was covered in an armor of faint mist.

Lay hummed in thought.

“So that’s how it is,” Misa muttered.

The Magic Eyes of the white dragon glowed with madness as it opened its

maw. “Ha ha ha! Bow before this divinity, Kanon! This is the guidance of the gods. My source has been swallowed by the variant dragon, but through Enes Ne Mes’s power, the creature and I have become one. This is what a god’s miracle looks like, and this form is called the Royal Dragon! With this body, I will consume the people of Azesion and lead them to the gods. Their condensed sources will eventually become new life in the form of a single dragonborn.”

As the Royal Dragon spread its wings, the holy water within the limestone cavern rose up and was absorbed by its giant body. In no time at all, the underground lake had dried up.

“That dragonborn will be the Great King blessed by the gods—Lycius Engelo Gairadite.”

Clad in an armor of fog, Royal Dragon Lycius glared at Lay and Misa. Neither one of them faltered. That is, until—

“Help me...”

A voice rang out.

“Please, save me, Hero. Father has gone mad!”

A Leaks message coming from within the dragon reached their ears.

“Can you hear that, Kanon? That is the voice of my daughter, one of the royals sacrificed to the variant.”

Lay shot Lycius a sharp look.

“Under normal circumstances, consumed sources do not retain self-awareness, but I used Enes Ne Mes’s power to leave just one intact. Why do you think I did that?”

“Because I would have to use the Sword of Three Races to sever her fate and save her.”

Those who had been eaten by a dragon would never return to normal, but if a victim was still conscious, the Sword of Three Races was capable of severing that fate.

“Exactly! Now, what will you do, Hero Kanon? Will you forsake my pitiful daughter and keep Evansmana sheathed? Unlike that monster of a woman

beside you, my daughter is far more frail, isn't she?"

Lay exhaled slowly. Then, with a look of resolution, he gathered his magic into his right hand. Evansmana was summoned in a flash of light.

"Heh heh heh, that's right," the Royal Dragon said with an eerie laugh that echoed through the cavern. "That's how it should be. You've finally decided to return our god. Now give it here, Kanon."

"It's a trap," Misa said.

"Maybe it is."

"You might regret saving her."

"I know that too."

Misa smiled softly. "Then follow your heart, and leave the rest to me."

The dragon let out a shrill squawk. "What's wrong, Kanon? If you won't make the first move, I will!"

The Royal Dragon's head shot forward to snap at the Sword of Three Races. As Lay deftly leaped to the side to evade it, a giant hole opened where his feet had been moments prior. He and Misa rose into the air using Fless.

"GROOOOOOAAH!"

With a deafening roar, the Royal Dragon released a white breath of light. Enes Ne Mes's order of emotions was being converted into magic through Aske and used to power Teo Triath.

"Not bad," Misa said. She wrapped Beno levun around Lay, who charged into the breath. Magic collided violently with magic, but Lay continued rushing towards the dragon's head.

"First hidden art of the Sword of Three Races"—as Lay lifted his sword, the magic pouring from his seven sources vanished at once—"*Heaven Splitter!*"

Countless flashes of light slashed the dragon's huge frame. The holy blade that could sever fate enshrouded the Royal Dragon with a divine light. From within that light, a single woman appeared. She still shared the body of the dragon.

“Grab on,” Lay said, offering the woman his hand. She frantically reached out and grabbed it. “I will end your tragic fate here. Don’t worry. Believe in me.”

She nodded. The Sword of Three Races transformed into light, which Lay thrust into her chest.

“Thank you.” She smiled as though truly at peace. “Now I can depart for the gods as well.”

Evansmana was absorbed into her body.

“Tch!”

“Farewell, Hero Kanon. No—without a holy sword, you’re just another demon.”

The woman’s nails extended rapidly and grew into dragon-like claws.

“I shall take you to the gods with me,” she said. Her claws slashed through the air like lightning, but before they could make contact with Lay’s head, she was grabbed by thin fingertips.

“Just how many times will you humans betray him before you’re satisfied?”

Jet-black fingers bore through the woman’s chest.

“Aaaaaah!”

Misa clenched her fist and forcibly tore the woman’s body from the Royal Dragon.

“Stop... Stop it! Let go of me! I must become one with the Royal Dragon. I must depart for the gods!”

“You’re not going to the gods—you’re going to hell.”

Misa clenched her Vebzud-covered fist and crushed the woman’s source. The princess transformed into light and vanished.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The Royal Dragon’s claws swung down, but Lay and Misa flew to the side to avoid them.

“Bwa ha ha! I have retrieved it—the god of Azesion, the Sword of Three

Races!”

The Sword of Three Races was completely absorbed by the Royal Dragon. Its huge, white body began to glow.

“G-G-G-GAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The Royal Dragon’s skull split in two, and a single, enormous horn slowly emerged from the split. The horn had a metallic sheen—as though it were a giant horn version of Evansmana.

“No matter how much time passes, I’m still a fool.”

“Oh? I don’t believe so.”

Although Lay had a sad look on his face, Misa smiled gently.

“We’ve learned that there are no humans here to be saved, and all that knowledge cost was a single stick. Now we can fight to our heart’s extent, no?”

Lay blinked in surprise, then nodded. “That’s right.” He turned to the Royal Dragon and smiled. “It was a gift to begin with. If you want it back, then you can have it, but even with the power of a dragon—even with the power of Enes Ne Mes and Evansmana—you won’t become the King of Azesion, Lycius.”

Lycius chuckled. “Fool. Why would I listen to the words of a mere demon with no sword? You, Kanon, were only the Hero because you were chosen by the holy sword. Without the blessings of the gods, you are no one. Meanwhile, I have been blessed with kingship by the almighty god! With eternal life and the Sword of Three Races, I will become the true Hero that reigns over Azesion!”

The Royal Dragon charged, lunging at Lay and Misa with the Evansmana horn. Lay drew the Sword of Intent from a storage circle and attempted to slice the horn off, but the demon sword snapped in an instant.

Lay immediately dodged the attack, letting the horn ram straight into the limestone wall. The Royal Dragon twisted its body and sliced through the wall like butter. Rubble came crashing down.

“With Enes Ne Mes, Aske, the holy water from this cavern, the variant, and the sources I’ve gathered, Evansmana is far more powerful in my hands than it ever was in yours! This is the true form of the holy sword!” Lycius shouted. He

flapped his wings and rose to the top of the cavern. From there, he assumed a gliding stance and dived straight at Lay. “Feel the power of the true holy sword and surrender to the gods!”

The giant horn, bathed in light, closed in on Lay. He kept his Magic Eyes on its movements and intercepted it with the broken Sword of Intent.

“Ha ha ha! Fool! Have you forgotten that your sword is broken?!”

“Hyah!”

Particles of light sparked and crackled. The Royal Dragon’s powerful dive came to a complete halt at Lay’s hands.

“What?!”

The broken Sword of Intent, covered in the light of Teo Aske, was forming a new blade. Its tip perfectly aimed at the Royal Dragon’s horn, it had blocked it with the highest precision.

“Some true holy sword that must be,” Misa said as she dispelled her Lynel and Najira, revealing herself to the dragon. In her hand was the Teo Aske sword together with Lay’s right hand. “You can’t even overpower our love.”

Black lightning crackled around her as she spoke. Jirasd struck the Royal Dragon’s body.

“ROOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!”

The Royal Dragon recoiled at the intense lightning bolt. The chains of Zola e Dypt rose to bind its giant frame.

“Match my movements, Misa.”

“Of course.”

With synchronized breaths, the two lifted the Teo Aske sword and swung it down together. The light extended farther and farther, forming an incredibly long blade. Connected by magic, Misa understood what Lay was thinking.

Teo Traloth was a spell that turned their love into a single force, but over the long history of heroes, a further stage of the spell had been developed. That further stage was the pinnacle of love magic, reached by uniting heart and body

to vanquish enemies—a sword that couldn't be obtained without two parties synchronizing every movement. It was a zenith that couldn't be reached with emotions alone, but Lay believed that Misa, the spirit of the Demon King of Tyranny's legend, could reach that point. Their love flared, burning intensely.

“Ligaro Tir Traloth!”

Their sword of light descended upon the dragon, sending up countless explosions along its trail. The explosions came from within the Royal Dragon's armor—no, from within its huge body. The sources the dragon had consumed were exploding.

“I-It can't be. This is impossible. How could I, the true Hero, the Royal Dragon, lose to demons who don't even wield a holy sword?!”

“It's simple,” Misa said, looking at Lay as the Royal Dragon was swallowed by the blast. “The Hero's true holy sword wasn't that silly stick. It was the love in his heart.”

They thrust Ligaro Tir Traloth forward again to finish off the Royal Dragon. The colossal sword of light pierced King Lycius's source.

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

Misa stood her ground. “Gods that don't know the power of love...”

“...can have a taste of it and drop dead,” Lay said.

The cavern shook under the force of a blast stronger than any before. At the center of it all, the Royal Dragon was completely buried by the rubble.

§ 39. Judgment Flutters Down

The Holy Seat Hall, Everastanzetta.

Ahid smiled at me. He had been watching the fight at the palace as well.

“Did you think you could beat the true Hero simply by taking Evansmana?” I asked.

Ahid sighed heavily. “You fail to understand, Misfit Anos Voldigoad. A divine message is not a prophecy or premonition. It is merely a means to guide us to the correct path. One must follow that message and endeavor to fulfill it.”

I snorted. “I see. I figured you’d come up with another clever excuse, but listen to yourself. Can’t you hear how ridiculous you sound?”

“Even if I must crawl across the ground, it is my duty as the Oracle to believe in the message and fulfill it. If the gods tell me to take the thorny path instead of the flat one, I will gladly do so.” Ahid clutched his hands in prayer and spoke quietly. “There are times of hardship and times of despair, but the gods will always provide the words to guide us down a new path. No matter how many trials break me, Equis will continue to watch over me. As long as I have faith, the path of hardship will lead me to my intended destination.”

“Crooks like you have only one destination,” I said, cutting off his prayer. “Hell.”

Ahid replied without a moment’s delay. “You seem to be under the mistaken impression that Hero Kanon has bested the gods by defeating the Royal Dragon. However, a divine message is far more profound than that. As I just stated, the gods will always guide us down a new path.” He gave me a look of pity. “When the dragons appeared in Azesion, you came to Gairadite with your followers. The Hero Academy took on the flight of dragons released, while your followers engaged with the dragons underground.”

Ahid smiled calmly as if everything was going according to plan. “Meanwhile, you came to this underground world. You should have protected your own

nation, Anos Voldigoad, Demon King of Dilhade. Instead, you came all the way here, unaware that the gods had led you.” He raised his pledge jewel ring and announced solemnly, “Today, the capital of your nation will fall. Midhaze, without its Demon King, will receive its retribution for defying the divine message.”

An image was projected onto the veil of light falling upon one of the holy seats. The image showed what was happening in Midhaze.

“Now, see for yourself what happens to your people following your defiance of the gods. This is your punishment. Comprehend your sins and repent.”

Clouds of dust dotted the outskirts of Midhaze. The screech of dragon cries could be heard throughout the area. Dragons were emerging from the ground one after another and charging towards the city. The size of the flight the Hero Academy had taken on was nothing compared to this—there were easily over a thousand of them.

Only ten meters remained before the dragons reached the city. The colossal horde was charging straight at the outer wall of Midhaze.

“Farewell, nation of a foolish heretic.”

There was a fierce explosion, and a harrowing scene unfolded before us. The dragons that had charged into the wall had had their limbs torn to shreds as the beasts were blown apart.

“That can’t—!” Ahid started yelling but quickly gathered himself and snapped his mouth shut. However, his expression was that of pure disbelief. Standing before the walls was the fully armed Demon King’s Army.

“All troops, attack! It’s been a long time since our last dragon hunt. Teach the dumb beasts who the true rulers of the surface are!” Nigitt shouted. His squad leaped forward and swung their demon swords, beheading the dragons one after another.

“Ready Jio Graze!” Devidra’s squad built their magic circles and took aim. “Fire!”

Black suns struck the dragons charging across the ground and incinerated them with ease. In an effort to evade, the dragons took to the skies—but that

was exactly what Rouche's squad was waiting for.

"Prepare Riga Shreyd. Wipe them out."

Ruthless blades of wind tore apart the dragons' wings, sending them falling back to the ground. The one thousand dragons were helpless against the army, and their numbers were reduced to half in no time at all.

"You see, there was a fool who approached the Royalists and proposed they takeover Midhaze using dragons," I said to Ahid, who was watching the fight in a daze. "Apparently, he believed that the dragons could avoid the army's notice and slip into the city as long as they dug a tunnel from outside the city walls."

Ahid's eyes widened in shock.

"What are you so astonished by? Did you really think my subordinates would struggle against a pack of lizards?"

"The Royalists were meant to resent the Demon King," Ahid muttered.

"If that was one of your divine messages, then it was a very misguided one. The Royalists are now a rehabilitation organization dedicated to reforming the hearts of those who resent the Demon King."

I had ordered Zerceanus to go along with Ahid's proposal and pass on false information about the Demon King's Army. It had been the perfect opportunity to exterminate a large number of dragons, so I had allowed the invasion to go ahead.

"Your preference for the thorny path appears to be true. It seems your god sure enjoys forcing hardship upon you."

Ahid closed his eyes as though to calm himself, then shook his head. "Oh, how could this be?" he lamented dramatically. "How could you be so foolish? Why would you destroy the messengers of the gods and increase your own suffering?"

"Even for you, that's a rather lame way of refuting defeat."

"As I said already, divine messages are far more profound than you think. You may believe that by facing me here, you can prevent my Selection God from acting elsewhere, but that assumption is wrong." Ahid slowly raised his hand

and pointed at the veil of light. “Behold what is happening at that hill.”

Southwest of Midhaze was a small hill that overlooked the entire city. A lone figure was standing on that hill—a silver-haired girl with a look of sadness in her Magic Eyes. It was Arcana.

“All is as the gods intend. A new path has opened once more. The dragons have created a domain surrounding Midhaze. Even with Gatom, you won’t make it back in time.” Ahid raised his Selection pledge jewel and addressed Arcana. “Arcana, my deity, it is time for you to pass judgment upon the sinful citizens of Midhaze. Show them the miracle of Altiertonoa, the Moon of Creation.”

Arcana quietly raised her arms and held her hands towards the sky. The tremendous power of the god caused darkness to cover the light, turning day to night. A faint light fell upon the world enclosed in darkness. It was the magical glow of the crescent moon Altiertonoa.

Arcana opened her mouth. I couldn’t hear what she said, but it definitely seemed she had mumbled something.

“Creation and destruction are two sides of the same coin. When the people of Midhaze perish, the power of creation will better illuminate the night. When Altiertonoa shines brighter, you will be purified by that light, Anos Voldigoad.”

Hmm. So that was why they’d released so many dragons. The more sources destroyed, the stronger the Moon of Creation that controlled the cycle of life would become. Ahid was sure that by doing that, he would be the one to win the Selection Trial. This man couldn’t even see his own god’s face.

“I have a question for you, Selection God Arcana,” I said to the veil of light, addressing the small god on the hill. “Do you wish to destroy Midhaze?”

She didn’t answer, but her fingers twitched.

“Or do you wish to save it?”

Despite listening to me, she continued to silently send magic to the Moon of Creation.

“You don’t seem like the kind of god that seeks destruction. Do you need to

go that far for a man like this?”

Ahid let out a chuckle. It sounded like a mocking sneer. “Have you finally learned to pray to the gods, Misfit?” he said triumphantly. “Sadly for you, my Selection God is bound by our pact to save *me*. She hears only *my* wishes, *my* prayers, and *my* repentance. Your prayers will not reach her. Midhaze will fall. The miracle of a god will pre— Gaaah!”

A demon sword made from Iris pierced Ahid’s abdomen.

“Did you really think you could act so high and mighty before me without your god?”

“Urk...”

“I am speaking to Arcana. Extras like you should remain silent.”

I tossed his body aside, demon sword and all. The sword pinned him to the wall as if to crucify him there.

“Hmm. A fitting appearance for a saint,” I said without taking my eyes off the veil of light. I asked after Arcana’s heart once again. “Answer me, Arcana. If destruction isn’t what you seek, I will bring you salvation.”

“What insolence are you spouting?! A demon could never save a god! Even the thought of such a thing is pure blasphem— Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Without sparing him a glance, I had unleashed Jirasd to strike him. “I told you to remain silent. Without Arcana here, you’re no more than a pathetic lizard,” I said, then returned to addressing Arcana. “There are times when even the gods are powerless. Uttering a single wish won’t infringe on your pledge.”

Lunar snowdrops fluttered down from Altiertonoa—beautiful but cruel flowers of creation. If they rained down on Midhaze, they would freeze everything they touched and snatch those lives.

A single one of those snowflakes fell, fluttering through the air to land softly on the head of a woman in Midhaze.

“I want...” Arcana mumbled with trembling lips. She spoke as she watched the life about to disappear before her. “These hands are for saving people. These feet are for walking to those in need.” Her tears fell, wetting the ground. “This

heart is for responding to prayers. I am not a miracle made to destroy!” she yelled, admitting her wish.

Hearing that, I smiled in spite of myself. “Stop her,” I ordered. The lunar snowdrop glowed and then melted away, but the woman looking up at the snowfall was still alive.

“What...? What just happened?” Ahid muttered, dumbfounded by the sight.

Night faded, and the sun reappeared in the sky. The Moon of Creation had vanished.

“Seventh hidden art of the Pillage Blade—*Stunning Night*.”

On the hill, a man appeared—the strongest demon swordsman, who could slice and steal the night itself. It was the Demon King’s right-hand man, Shin Reglia.

“Selection God Arcana,” he said. He calmly walked forward and came to a stop before her. “No matter the circumstances, I cannot forgive those who stand against the Demon King of Tyranny.” Shin glared at her menacingly. “However, my liege has ordered me to stop you. Out of respect for my liege’s generous heart, I will refrain from destroying you.”

He drew a magic circle and reached inside with his left hand. A rusted sword overflowing with sinister magic was slowly drawn out. It was Gneodoros, the God Slasher—Gneodoros, the blade that could slay gods.

“Your death will be swift and painless.”

§ 40. Underground Snowfall

Arcana's Magic Eyes fell upon Shin and his two demon swords.

"You are the enemy. I must eliminate you," she said sadly. Cold air flowed from her hands, forming a sword of snow.

"Rest assured," Shin said, adopting an oblique stance. He stood with the God Slasher held high in one hand and the Pillage Blade held out before him with the other. "That will be impossible."

Arcana took a step forward. Her body transformed into a bolt of light and shot towards him—it was the power of Giosselia, the God of Brilliance, whom she had consumed. She moved behind Shin in the blink of an eye and swung down her sword of snow, scattering glittering lunar snowdrops all around them.

However, Shin evaded her swing without so much as a glance at the sword, moving so fast it was as though the blade had passed through him.

"Relying on pure speed to take down someone from behind results in too many wasteful movements."

By the time he turned around, fresh blood was already spilling from Arcana's left arm. Shin had moved at an even greater speed than she had, slashing her in the time it had taken her to slip past him.

"You are strong too," Arcana said. She held up her left hand, and day once again turned to night. With her divine magic, she was recreating the night Shin had stolen from her. The Moon of Creation appeared in the darkness, and moonlight fell upon the hill. Countless lunar snowdrops rained down from Altiertonaa.

"Sleep under the cold rain of ice."

The lunar snowdrops surrounding Shin morphed into sharp icicles that shot downwards in a brilliant blast of cold air, leaving no room for escape.

Shin's arms flashed with the swing of his swords. The God Slasher and Pillage

Blade slashed apart every last icicle, reducing them to icy dust.

“Snow piles up; light falls.”

Lunar snowdrops rained down heavily upon the hill, transforming the scenery into a fantastical snowscape. The divine power behind the cold air drained Shin of his magic with every passing moment.

Suddenly, his magic completely vanished. His source had become one with the Pillage Blade. He pointed the tip of Gilionojos upwards. The demon sword bore a jet-black hole in the sky. With a black flash, Shin swung the blade down and split the sky into two. The night shattered like glass, revealing the day from behind it.

This was the seventh hidden art of the Pillage Blade, Stunning Night—a slash that could slice apart natural magic circles affecting the time and the weather like how it had stolen the night.

“As my liege inferred, your Moon of Creation is incomplete.”

The crescent-moon Altiertonoa was not only incomplete in form, but in power as well. That was why Stunning Night could slice the night apart. If Altiertonoa had been at its full power, things wouldn’t have gone so easily.

Unfazed by Shin’s demon sword, Arcana mumbled quietly, “Ice fangs pierce the skies, tearing a hole of solitude in the chest.”

The lunar snowdrops that scattered from her hands painted their surroundings with snow. Behind her, numerous spears of ice resembling dragon fangs floated in the air. They had been created with the order of Beheus, the God of Piercing.

The spears flew towards Shin, but whenever he deflected them, they would merely spin in the air and shoot right back towards him. Arcana turned into light and swung her snow sword at him at the same time. He blocked the blow with the God Slasher, but her strength pressed him back, making his feet sink into the ground. Due to her consuming all those gods, her physical strength surpassed his.

“Burdened with sin, the sword passes judgment.”

Another sword of snow appeared behind Arcana and flew towards her back. The blade impaled her through the chest and stabbed into Shin, whose sword was locked with hers on the other side.

Red blood sprayed into the air, staining the snow. Arcana's eyes widened slightly.

Despite being in a difficult position and blind to the approaching sword, Shin had twisted his body at the last moment and evaded the oncoming blade. It had only gouged a shallow scratch on his chest.

"Not bad," he said.

Arcana instantly retreated, but there was blood dripping along the God Slasher. Her right arm dropped from her shoulder and disappeared into the snow.

"It's rare for anyone to last so long against me."

Lunar snowdrops fell from the wound at her elbow, recreating her lost arm.

"However..."

Shin took a step towards Arcana. His movements were slower than hers, but his way of walking made her misjudge how much distance there was between them. The moment she tried to leap away, the Pillage Blade severed her legs from her body, robbing her of the ability to move.

Just then, ice covered her legs. Her order, the order of creation, was trying to build new feet from scratch, freeing her from the curse of the Pillage Blade. But before she succeeded, the God Slasher was dyed red.

"God Slasher, third hidden art..."

Sinister particles of magic swirled furiously around his blade. Arcana finished creating her feet and her ability to move was restored.

"...Hell."

Shin thrust Gneodoros into the right side of Arcana's chest, splitting her source into two. When he released his grip on the God Slasher, she fell to her knees with a blank expression.

“Ah...” was all she murmured.

The two halves of Arcana’s source were then split into four. She exercised her power of creation along with the Keeper of Restoration’s order to heal her source as best as she could, but it was just sliced apart by Hell once again.

Her movements slowed by intense pain, Arcana grabbed the God Slasher and tried to pull it out, but her body was too weak from using the last of her strength to heal herself.

“Incidentally,” Shin said, glaring sharply at the forest beside the hill, “how long did you all think you could hide for?”

One flash of the Pillage Blade later, the trees in the distance were cut down, revealing the draconid soldiers hidden behind them. Clad in white armor, they were staring in astonishment at the kneeling Arcana. Seeing the god they worshipped in such a state, they had already lost their will to fight, but Shin landed a finishing blow with his words.

“If you wish to save her, come at me now. But I’m warning you”—he flashed the Pillage Blade at them—“I was not given orders to go easy on anyone else.”

Trembling from the pressure, the draconids gulped. “That can’t be. Did he just... Did this man just say he was holding back against the Selection God Arcana? He was holding back against a god?!”

“What is the meaning of this? How could a demon unrelated to the Selection Trial fight on par with a god? Was there no divine message?!”

“I can think of one possibility. If he possesses a power even the gods cannot see...”

“No way! Surpassing the gods is impossible!”

“But the Selection God is on her knees over there, isn’t she?!”

“Who is he? Wasn’t this man meant to be a mere subordinate? Then what does that make the Demon King?!”

“If that man is this strong, then the Demon King of Tyranny must be...”

“H-Have we made an enemy out of someone far worse than we expected?”

It seemed they had completely underestimated the Demon King's Army. In the face of the man who had defeated Arcana, the draconid soldiers were seized with fear.

"There is nothing to be afraid of, devout followers of god."

Still pinned against the wall by my sword, Ahid called out to the shaken soldiers.

"A divine message has been handed down. Misfit Anos Voldigoad has resurrected the blasphemous god. Everything is the work of Genedonov, Goddess of Absurdity. As servants of the Almighty Radiance, we must overcome this trial."

The draconid soldiers began to pray as though this could dispel their fears.

"According to the diving message, a thousand lives will perish in this conflict. Once that happens, Altiertonoo's brilliance will increase, releasing Arcana from the curse of the demon sword."

The draconids nodded with looks of resolution. With that, their concealment magic lifted, revealing far more soldiers than had been visible before. There were enough soldiers to cover the entire hillside.

"Devout followers, the divine message is never wrong. Let us sacrifice a thousand lives to the Selection God Arcana. By doing so, you will be invited to our god's side and receive salvation."

The draconids drew their swords in unison.

"All is as the Almighty Radiance wishes."

They pointed their swords at their own hearts—and plunged them through their chests.

"As the Almighty Radiance wishes!"

Blood sprayed from their bodies. The draconids then used their own fiery breaths to cremate themselves until every last one of the thousand lives had perished and burned.

Their act seemed to have a true effect on the order of creation, as Arcana was able to use Gatom and vanish from the hill. Shin looked around warily, but she

had made a full retreat.

“My deepest apologies, my liege. I let her get away,” Shin said to me through Leaks.

“It’s fine.” I looked away from the image and over at Ahid. “Calling upon your comrades to kill themselves just to make the message come true is nothing short of appalling.”

“I won’t allow you to insult them. The devout followers of Jiordal offered their lives to protect the words of our god. Their noble intentions and absolute faith in Equis is their salvation and what makes them the most honorable of people.”

I sighed at his terrible reasoning. “It seems there’s no point in talking to you.” I drew a magic circle and directed it at Ahid. “Where did you send Arcana?”

“What kind of follower would inform a heretic of their god’s location?”

“Then I shall give you a divine message of my own: in three seconds’ time, she will appear here.”

A jet-black sun appeared from the magic circle and shot towards Ahid. Still immobile, he had no means of evading it, and a direct hit would reduce him to ashes.

“O Selection God, heed my call. Bring upon us judgment as our pact decrees!”

With a deafening roar, Jio Graze closed in on Ahid’s face, but the moment it was about to touch his nose, it disappeared. A single lunar snowdrop fluttered down.

“Guala Nateh Forteos.”

In a flash of light, the silver-haired Selection God Arcana appeared before me, invoked by Ahid’s summoning spell. With a single glance at the demon sword skewering him, it dispersed into particles of ice. Regenerating light enveloped his body, healing his wounds in an instant.

“Hmm. So she went to get the Sword of Three Races from the Royal Dragon.”

Arcana held the Sword of Three Races in her right hand and the God Slasher—which had previously been embedded in her chest—in her left.

“Misfit Anos Voldigoad, you believed you overturned all of the divine messages given to me. However, all was in the palm of our god’s hand. No matter where you go or what you do, there is no escaping the inevitable.” Ahid spread his arms as he spoke. “And now, I have finally received the order to judge you. Do you understand what this means? With this, I no longer have to remain passive and nonresistant.”

“Oh?”

He made it sound like he’d been holding back on purpose earlier.

“So you’re finally ready to defeat me.”

“The pact forbids fighting within the Holy Seat Hall. Let us move locations.”

“Anywhere’s fine by me.”

Arcana used Gatom on herself and Ahid. I saw the spell formula she’d used and copied it for myself. The pure-white scene around me faded to reveal a landing of Everastanzetta. We were on a large, circular balcony with a view of the underground dome overhead.

“Behold! This is Altiertonoa’s true form—the light of creation that illuminates this underground world!”

Arcana slowly raised her arms, turning her palms towards the sky. The Moon of Creation floated near the top of the dome. It had progressed in shape from a crescent moon to a half-moon.

“Draconid bodies cannot withstand being used as vessels of divine possession. Thus, Equis has decided to remodel my own into a divine body. This miracle will be performed by the Moon of Creation that shines in the sky above!”

Blinding light shone down from Altiertonoa, enveloping Ahid below. His body was being reconstructed by the power of creation—into something strong and resilient enough to withstand the power of any gods that possessed him. His hair was dyed a golden yellow and shifted to reveal his hidden eye.

“Azept: Arcana.”

Arcana thrust her two swords into the ground, transforming into glowing lunar snowdrops that were sucked into Ahid’s body. The Selection God had

descended into the newly enhanced vessel. A staggering torrent of magic swirled in a vortex with Ahid standing in the center. He looked at me coolly.

“Do you see now? This is my destiny. I, Ahid Alover Agartz, the Oracle chosen by a Selection God, will one day become the miracle that reaches the gods. I am the rightful agent of the gods.”

Ahid pointed quietly. Lunar snowdrops started raining around me, transforming the area into a spectacle of snow.

“There is no daytime underground. It is impossible to steal the night and eliminate Altiertonoa. Snow will continue piling up, and light will continue falling. Enclosed in the glittering cold air, you will soon breathe your last breath.”

The lunar snowdrops falling across the castle released a divine chill, draining my magic and stamina.

“Those without divine bodies will be unable to lift a finger beneath this snowfall. Now freeze and fall into an eternal sleep.”

“Hmm. Unfortunately for you, I don’t mind the snow.”

Through my mauve Magic Eyes, I glared at the scenery before me. Then I took a step forward. The falling snow melted away beneath my gaze, and by the time I took a second step, the snow around my footprints had melted too.

“Freeze and die,” Ahid chanted, but I walked on without a care. The calm in his expression was promptly replaced with panic. “Freeze and die, foolish heretic who defies the gods!”

As he yelled, the number of falling snowdrops increased, but I kept on walking through the frozen world. Like that, I arrived before him without any issues.

“All is helpless before the power of the gods! Freeze and fall into an eternal sleep!”

“So this is your destiny?” I grabbed him by the head.

“What?! How has this heretic melted your snow, my deity?! O gods, please give me your divine message!”

“Who are you praying to? Aren’t you the god right now?”

I drew a magic circle, and Jio Graze engulfed his body. The black sun proceeded to drive him towards the wall, incinerating him with its black fire.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“Did gaining a divine body enhance your delusions as well, you crook?”

Ahid’s body broke through the wall and rolled across the floor inside the building.

“The true power of the Moon of Creation is nothing like this.”

§ 41. Sword of the Almighty

A clear voice caught my attention.

“Stand up, Ahid.”

Arcana’s magic body appeared in the moonlight. Her divine power had been summoned into Ahid’s body, so she wasn’t particularly threatening in her current state. This was only her will.

“Your divine body isn’t wounded in the slightest.”

She raised her glowing arms, holding up the God Slasher and the Sword of Three Races. Altiertonoa’s light shone down on the two swords, creating a sparkling silver bridge between the moon and the ground.

The Moon of Creation slowly began to travel along that bridge, descending towards them. As the half-moon drew nearer, its light bathed the holy sword and demon sword in Arcana’s hands. The outlines of the two swords began to warp like melting snow, turning into a liquid that mixed in the light.

The light of the half-moon transformed a long object—a sword. Evansmana and Gneodoros had become one with Altiertonoa.

Arcana sheathed the blade in the golden sheath that appeared in her hand, completing the sword of tranquility.

“Levyngilma, Sword of the Almighty.”

“Oh?”

I cast my Magic Eyes forward. Ahid had returned to the balcony, standing as though nothing had happened. His divine body wouldn’t have died to the blast, but he should have at least suffered some wounds. However, there was no sign of anything of the sort, as though I’d never fired Jio Graze in the first place. There weren’t even any signs of healing magic. So this was the power of the Sword of the Almighty, huh?

“Misfit Anos Voldigoad.” Arcana bent her knees and raised both hands. The

Sword of the Almighty floated through the air and stopped before me. *“You will now receive judgment performed by Levyngilma. As long as this divine sword exists, my follower, Ahid Alovo Agartz, will remain in a state of permanence. He cannot be destroyed by any means.”*

So that was why he had walked away completely unaffected by Jio Graze. Erasing wounds from the past was quite the mysterious effect.

“There is only one way to destroy the Oracle: unsheathe the Sword of the Almighty and use it to cut him three times.”

Ahid would die from three mere slashes of the sword. In exchange for that fragility, he had become indestructible against every other attack.

“But when the Sword of the Almighty is drawn from its sheath, the power of the divine sword will erase the past, present, and future of the source that drew it.”

Hmm. So even Agronemt wouldn't work. If what she said was true, then the divine sword possessed power that surpassed that of Ahid's current state. The sword was a miracle created through the combination of the Sword of Three Races, the God Slasher, and the Moon of Creation. Evansmana probably played the largest part in this, which was why Ahid had plotted to steal it from Lay. The sword created to destroy the Demon King had to possess its own adequate source for the purpose.

“The Selection God Arcana will act as judge. Misfit Anos Voldigoad, answer the question. Is there an almighty one in this world?”

If I didn't draw the Sword of the Almighty, Ahid couldn't be wounded, but if I drew it, I would die before Ahid could be destroyed. This was the trial Arcana had given me.

“Heh heh. Ha ha ha ha!” Ahid suddenly burst into eerie laughter. “I have received a divine message. Levyngilma, the sword created by the almighty one, can never be drawn by anyone. The source of the one who draws the blade will be erased from the past, present, and future. In other words, they will cease to exist at every point in time.” He walked towards me smugly. “Do you understand? An almighty one like me cannot be defeated by one as powerless as you.”

“Hmm. Let’s suppose you truly were almighty, Ahid. Should that almighty one squeal so disgracefully when struck by a harmless Jio Graze? Perhaps you should have called yourself all-knowing instead.”

Ahid smiled serenely. “Is it a sin not to know fear?” He shook his head and answered his own question. “No, I do not believe so.” He came to a stop and looked straight at me. “It is only natural for the heart of a mortal to feel fear. Fear that stems from the knowledge of pain is necessary for the salvation of this world. You may slander me by calling my fear disgraceful, but I will take on this holy war together with this pain.”

Lunar snowdrops fluttered from Ahid’s right palm, forming the shape of a sword.

“I may be ignorant, but unlike you, I am not arrogant enough to assume I know everything. It is my duty as the Oracle to know that I am ignorant. The wisdom that I lack will be supplemented by the words of Equis!”

Ahid burst into a run, swinging the sword of snow at me with all his might. I wrapped Benolevun around my right hand and grabbed the blade.

“It seems you are ignorant as well. This sword born from lunar snowdrops is made of the snow of a god. Anything it comes into contact with Locoronotto, the Sword of Divine Snow, will freeze—even magic itself.” Ahid spoke as if saying a prayer. “Farewell, Misfi—”

The blade of the snow sword snapped in my Vebzud-covered fingers.

“What?!”

“Remember this: admitting you know nothing is exactly what a fool would do to make themselves sound better.” I thrust my Vebzud-covered left hand towards Ahid’s heart, but my fingertips couldn’t break his skin. “*Jirasd*.”

Black lightning coiled around Ahid, crackling loudly as it swelled as if it were about to explode. Then, with a thunderous rumble, a force powerful enough to shake Everastanzetta struck his body.

However, while his clothes were slightly charred by the blast, Ahid remained unharmed. He was pushed back by the force of *Jirasd*, but there wasn’t a single scratch on his divine body.

“Hmm. The Sword of the Almighty appears to be real, at least,” I said.

Ahid glared at me, clenching his hand around the broken sword of snow. Arcana, meanwhile, gazed into my mauve Magic Eyes.

“The Sword of Divine Snow had no effect because of his Magic Eyes. Though they resemble the Magic Eyes of Destruction, they are not the same. They are the reason the undestroyable god was reduced to nothing.”

“You sure are looking deep into my abyss. Why don’t you just take his place rather than sending him messages? No matter how much power you give him, he’s no match if he doesn’t know how to use it.”

I drew a large magic circle on the dome of the underground world. Gigantic magic rocks appeared one after enough, shimmering with a jet-black sheen. It was Gia Gleas. Countless magic rocks the size of stars rained down on Ahid.

“Intercept them with lunar snowdrops.”

“As you wish, my deity.”

Ahid raised his hands and created lunar snowdrops to freeze Gia Gleas. Threads of ice stitched the magic rocks to the dome, preventing them from falling.

“If you only pay attention to what’s overhead, you’ll lose sight of what stands before you.”

Ahid startled at my voice and looked back down, but there was already a collar around his neck.

“If your body is immortal, how about this?”

Nedneliaz released its magic, but Ahid dived forward without falling prisoner to the dream. He ran around me using the order of the God of Brilliance, using more lunar snowdrops to restore the broken Sword of Divine Snow.

“I cannot be damaged by any attack, and you can block every attack. At a glance, we’re evenly matched, but even without a divine message, it’s clear which of us is superior.”

“Indeed. A divine body may be immortal, but your weakness is in full view. I don’t need to attack you to wound you.”

“Foolish heretic. A devout follower like me would never say this, but most people would call you a sore loser.”

Lunar snowdrops poured from Ahid’s body and fluttered up into the sky. The snow flowers, carried by the wind, soared up and up until they rained down upon not only the institute, but the entirety of Gaelahesta.

“You claimed I had failed to draw out Altiertonoa’s true power. With that in mind, I shall now demonstrate and put an end to this.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Arcana gasp.

“The falling lunar snowdrops will bury the people, returning them to the gods. As more perish, the Moon of Creation will glow brighter, and the moonlight of Levyingilma shall shine upon the heretic.”

“Ahid, Gaelahesta has a nonaggression pact in place. You must not offer the draconids here for the Selection Trial.”

“Arcana, my deity, please allow me to repent. Forgive me for my ignorant actions. As a loyal follower of Equis, I cannot allow this heretic to harm the gods, even if that means disobeying the divine message.”

Arcana looked at him with an indescribable look of sadness. She wanted to save him no matter how irredeemable he was.

“I am expressing my repentance, my deity. Will you, a god yourself, not offer me your forgiveness?”

Arcana lowered her gaze and opened her mouth with a look of resignation.
“Oracle Ahid, may you find salva—”

“You said you were searching for an answer,” I said, cutting her off.

Arcana turned to me.

“You asked me whether the almighty one can create a sword no one can draw.” I grabbed the Sword of the Almighty as it floated before me. “In other words, you wanted to know whether the almighty one can save everyone at once.” With Levyingilma in one hand, I glared at Ahid as he moved about at the speed of light. “Salvation to one person may mean destruction to another. If you attempt to save the former, the latter cannot be saved. The almighty one

will never be almighty.”

Ahid extended his hand towards me and fired icicles from his palm. I deflected the barrage of ice blades with a globe of Beno levun. The next moment, a white flash slashed Beno levun apart.

“It seems I can cut you if I swing at this speed.”

“What about it?”

With Vebzud-covered fingertips, I sliced the snow sword’s blade off at the base. Ahid tossed the hilt aside and reached for me with his right hand. Beno levun was unable to harm his body while it was under the protection of Levyngilma. His fingertips pierced my heart, sending up a spray of fresh blood.

“The fact that this divine body cannot be hurt makes this body my greatest weapon. You were defeated today by your overconfidence in your knowledge—but you knew nothing.” Ahid clenched his right fist around my source, crushed it and yanked it out of my chest. “It seems you were no match for me, the one who obeys the divine messages.”

He turned back to Arcana, who was watching him with a grim look. “Please grant me your forgiveness, my deity, Selection God Arcana. I only sought to destroy the people of Gaelahesta to make the Misfit believe I had no other means of defeating him. It was not my true intention.” He knelt in repentance.

“In that case, you should stop scattering lunar snowdrops,” I said.

He whirled around in the direction of my voice. I stood before him, unharmed.

“You have the Magic Eyes of a god, yet unlike Arcana, you can’t see anything at all. Take a good look at what it was you grabbed and pulled out.”

I canceled Lynel, the spell I’d cast around his hand, to reveal the object he was holding. In his hand was the shining silver blade of the Sword of the Almighty, Levyngilma.

Him crushing my heart and source had been nothing but an illusion. What he had actually grabbed was the hilt of Levyngilma and then he’d pulled the sword out of its sheath. The source he thought he had destroyed was a fake I’d

created using Eleonore. Arcana had probably noticed this, but her divine message had failed to arrive in time.

“When the Sword of the Almighty is drawn from its sheath, the power of the divine sword will erase the past, present, and future of the source that drew it.”

“That can’t be,” Ahid muttered slowly, overcome with shock. “This... This is...”

His lips trembled, but no further words came out.

“Can the almighty one create a sword that no one can draw? Let’s say you, as the creator of Levyngilma, are the almighty one. When the almighty one draws the Sword of the Almighty, the almighty one’s existence is erased throughout all of time.”

Ahid listened in a daze, horror spreading across his face.

“No one can draw the Sword of the Almighty. That means there is no almighty one. No one can save everyone. Realizing this was the Selection God’s trial.” I turned to Arcana and asked, “Isn’t that right?”

She nodded. *“Gods are not almighty. One must be able to realize this to be worthy of becoming an agent of god.”*

Ahid’s face turned completely pale. Unable to endure the sound of death’s footsteps, he broke down.

“Ah... Aaah! AAAH!” he cried, staggering and falling to knees. Then he threw up. “Ulgh. Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Ugh, agh, gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Whoever drew the Sword of the Almighty would be erased. Ahid ripped at his hair as he vomited his stomach acid out in a craze.

“This is not ignorance; it is pure stupidity.” I turned to Arcana, who was watching Ahid sadly. “Tell him. He’s too pathetic to bear.”

“Oracle Ahid, there is nothing to fear. You will not die. That is not Levyngilma in your hands.”

Covered in vomit, Ahid looked down at the divine sword in shock.

“It’s a fake I created with magic. The real sword is here.” I revealed the real Sword of the Almighty that I had hidden with Lynel and Najira. “If this was the

sword you had drawn, you would have perished in an instant.”

Ahid got to his feet, too dumbfounded to speak.

“What? Feeling better already?” I chuckled. “For someone with an indestructible divine body, you sure have a delicate heart.”

Shaking with rage, Ahid shot me a glare of incomprehension. “I don’t know what you’re plotting, but I know that I am alive due to the guidance of the gods. This good fortune and blessings such as these are what make me the Oracle.”

I burst into laughter. “What are you misunderstanding now? If you think you’ve been saved, then you’re sorely mistaken.”

His immortal body flinched at my words.

“Your hell is yet to even begin.” I grabbed the sheath of Levyngilma and slowly wrapped my left hand around the hilt. “Can the almighty one create a sword that no one can draw? Is there no almighty one?” I held the divine sword at the ready as I spoke. “I gave you one possible answer earlier, Arcana, but that was only my guess at what you were thinking.”

I glanced over at Arcana, who was listening to me with a serious look. There was no almighty one. Although that was the conclusion she’d come to, she craved something else—a different answer to the question.

“I will now proceed to give you *my* answer. Whether you believe it is up to you.”

§ 42. Almighty Demon King

Ahid glared at me with unsuppressed anger. “Arrogant heretic. What could someone like you teach my Selection God?” He shook his head dramatically. “Earlier you claimed my own Selection God was fed up with me. That belief is a result of your ignorance. By saving someone beyond salvation, a standard is established for everyone to be saved.” He wrapped his left hand around his Selection pledge jewel in a prayer. “The one the gods are truly fed up with is you, who is yet to make a pact despite being one of the Selected Eight.”

“Those are some big words for someone who made such a disgrace of themselves just moments ago. Even I am no match for you in shamelessness.”

“That was just to test you. In order to defeat me, you must make me draw Levyngilma myself. But you became so intent on making me suffer that you forgot we’re in the midst of the noble Selection Trial.” The man continued ranting brazenly. “I am but a mirror that reflects your image. If I appear weak and ugly to you, then that is because your heart is weak and ugly. The image you saw of me throwing up here was the image of your true self. In the name of showing you the truth, I accepted the pain of your sin, for I am willing to bear all the sins of mankind.”

Ahid quietly closed his eyes. “O Equis, the Almighty Radiance, allow this body of mine to atone for the sins of others. Please forgive this ignorant fool,” he said in prayer. When he opened his eyes again, he shot me a sharp glare, making it clear there wasn’t any doubt in his heart. “All your words are being reflected back upon you, Anos Voldigoad.”

“Bwa ha ha! Don’t make me laugh. When did you make the career change from crook to clown? You’re funnier than a good comedy show.”

Ahid pursed his lips. He must have been discontent.

“But you truly are a man beyond salvation. Very well. Since I’m already teaching Arcana, I’ll teach you something too.”

His face twisted in irritation.

“Arcana made a mistake when she chose you.”

“You really are too arrogant for your own good, Misfit.”

Ahid took a step forward and scattered lunar snowdrops from his hands. They emitted the light of creation and transformed his arms into sharp stakes.

“Even someone as ignorant as you should know what would happen if this immortal body turned into a weapon, no?”

“What? All I know is you’ve remodeled your arms just to prevent yourself from ever drawing Levyngilma.”

Ahid snorted. “You should be ashamed of yourself for ridiculing others. No matter what verbal abuse you spout, you no longer have any chance of victory. It is time for the heretic with no place in the Selection Trial to leave.” He directed his strength to his feet. “Farewell, Misfit.”

With the Sword of the Almighty still in hand, I drew several magic circles over my body, overlapping them in layers. “*Veneziara*.”

My body and magic blurred, swaying like a wave. I hadn’t moved a step, yet an afterimage of me stepping forward and releasing magic was present.

“You can use all the magic you want, but you cannot stop this immortal body.”

Ahid started running, turning into light. He headed straight for me and thrust his right arm forward with incredible speed. In return, I adjusted my grip on Levyngilma and kicked off the ground. The next moment, Ahid and I had passed each other and swapped positions.

With his back to me, he said, “You may have avoided me this time, but that won’t happen again. You are destined to perish at the hands of a god.”

“Oh, am I now? With your hands like those?”

“What are you sayi— Hmm?” Ahid raised his arms and finally noticed what was missing from below his elbow. “What?!”

One beat later, blood started pouring from his severed arms.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Stop wailing, scum. The noise is grating on my ears.”

Ahid’s face was pale as a sheet as his supposedly immortal body shook from head to toe.

“Unforgivable... You will never be forgiven,” he muttered deliriously before turning to look at Arcana. “Arcana, my deity, what is the meaning of this?! Wasn’t this body meant to be immortal?! Please grant me your divine message!”

“What are you talking about? Arcana just said there’s only one way to destroy you. The Sword of Almighty must be drawn and used to cut you thrice.”

Ahid stared at the Sword of the Almighty in my hand. It was still in its sheath.

“It can’t be. Levyngilma is a divine sword that can never be drawn! You would be dead if it wasn’t in its sheath. As long as you are alive, that sword has not been drawn!”

I held Levyngilma at the ready and informed him kindly, “Then try it. Next, I’ll cut the connection between you and the god you summoned.”

“That... That can’t be possible! How arrogant can one be? You think you can lay your hands on my divine power? As if such a thing would be forgiven! Reveal your tricks, Misfit!”

He scattered lunar snowdrops to transform his feet into stakes, but the moment he did so, everything below his knees was cut off.

“Wha... Ah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The divine power he had summoned was severed from his body. His gold hair returned to green as light gathered around Arcana, returning her body to its original divine form.

“The power of the gods...is slipping away... My divine power! Why has this happened to my immortal body?! Why?! Please, give me a divine message!”

Unable to balance on his severed limbs, he collapsed helplessly face up on the ground. I walked leisurely over to him.

“Veneziara is a spell that realizes possibilities.”

“Realizes possibilities? What are you saying?”

“Don’t you understand? When Levyngilma is in its sheath, there is a possibility for it to be drawn and a possibility for it not to be drawn. Using Veneziara, I made both of those possibilities come to be at once.”

I held the Sword of the Almighty up so that Ahid could see it. It was still in its sheath.

“As long as Levyngilma remains in its sheath, I haven’t drawn the sword. As long as the sword is in the sheath, I will not perish. To think of it another way, the fact I haven’t perished proves this sword hasn’t been drawn.”

“You cannot hurt this immortal body without drawing the sword,” Ahid muttered.

“Then this should be quick to explain. If your immortal body was wounded, then Levyngilma was drawn—that is, while remaining sheathed.”

Ahid furrowed his brow in confusion.

“The almighty one created a sword that could not be drawn. If the almighty one drew that sword, it would no longer be a sword that could not be drawn. But if the almighty one couldn’t draw that sword, they would not be almighty, so what is the almighty one to do?”

Ahid’s expression grew more and more apprehensive as I spoke.

“The answer is this: the almighty one can and cannot draw the sword at the same time. The sword that cannot be drawn by anyone can be drawn without being drawn. It’s simple, no? If one is almighty, then they must be able to draw and not draw the sword at the same time.”

“What... What nonsense is this? Such a thing isn’t possible. It’s a contradiction!”

I grinned at Ahid’s bewilderment. “That is what Veneziara for you. Whether it be sheathed or unsheathed, both possibilities exist at the same time.”

I might draw the sword, and I might not draw the sword. It was only natural for both possibilities to exist at the same time.

“And so, I realized both possibilities at once. Contradicting forms of Veneziara can exist concurrently because they are only possibilities.”

Ahid looked as though his mind had gone completely blank. “But the moment they were realized, they would have contradicted each other. If you hadn’t drawn the sword, my body would be unharmed. If you had, you would have vanished. It doesn’t make any sense!”

“Indeed, the logic is absurd. That is because this trial of the almighty one’s sword was made by someone who isn’t almighty. The logic of those who aren’t almighty does not apply to the almighty. And, since the almighty one is almighty, they cannot be governed by logic in the first place.”

Ahid’s face twisted in confusion. “You’re wrong.”

“Bwa ha ha! Don’t you get it, Ahid? Well, that’s fine too. To put it simply for you, it’s just like how the words of the almighty one cannot be understood by those who are not almighty, just like how I am to you, as you admitted to yourself just now.”

For a moment, he stared at me blankly. I pointed at the ominous collar around his neck.

“Your immortal divine body is gone. It’s time for the nightmare to begin.”

“Ah... Aaagh!”

Nedneliaz activated, ready to send him into his nightmare.

“The dream you will see will be of a world where you are continually betrayed by the gods. Go about your kingdom and spread the word of how the Almighty Radiance doesn’t exist. However, you must not kill anyone, including yourself. If you break this rule, you will never wake again. If all goes well, time will rewind, and you will be betrayed by the gods once again. Repeat that life one thousand times and discard your faith before returning.” I smirked wickedly as I informed him of his fate. “It will be a nightmare from which you cannot wake.”

The light disappeared from Ahid’s eyes. He had departed for the world built by Nedneliaz.



“Now...” The sound of my footsteps echoed as I walked up to the small god. “How did you like my answer, Arcana?”

“There is no almighty one.” Her clear eyes stared straight at me. “It is impossible to save everyone. That’s what I once believed.”

She held out her hand, and Ahid’s ring flew into her palm.

“Your answer is more correct than mine. This holy war ends with your victory. Kill me and take my order for yourself,” Arcana said without any hesitation. It seemed she didn’t fear death.

“If you’re acknowledging my victory, then there’s one thing I’d like to ask before we settle this.”

Arcana nodded. “As the victor, you have the right to that. I will answer anything within my knowledge.”

“Back in the Hero Academy’s auditorium, you went out of your way to approach me to ask about the almighty one’s sword. That wasn’t under Ahid’s instruction.”

“That is correct.”

“Why were you seeking an answer?”

Arcana had used the Selection Trial to test whether I could answer her question, going as far as creating Levyngilma to judge. If I hadn’t answered, she would have given another person the same trial.

“It couldn’t have been just for the sake of the fight.”

She thought for a long moment before lowering her gaze. “I am a god, yet I am the one who has sinned,” she said, almost sounding repentant, “for I have forgotten my name.”

§ 43. Words of the Pact

Arcana's pure eyes turned towards me. Although her expression was as transparent as ever, for some reason, I was reminded of Misha's words.

A parched thirst. As though she were wandering through an endless desert with no water.

"Hmm. What do you mean?"

"By choosing a candidate, any god can become a Selection God," she said quietly. "I have forgotten the name I had before I made that choice. All I recall is that I wanted kindness."

Each word she uttered sounded like a droplet of falling sadness.

"That means I wasn't kind."

Her grief-stricken eyes gazed into the distant past.

"Gods are order. They have no emotions. They are not living. I believe that's why I discarded my name. I exchanged my name and memories for a heart, but the heart of a human—filled with love and kindness—disturbs order. I obtained a chaos no god should have."

She spoke as though that was a sin.

"As a nameless god, I brought light to the underground world without realizing this. The light of salvation. I thought that was what I had to do. I thought that if I acted with kindness, if I cared deeply for others, I would be able to break away from the confines of order and save more people."

Gods obeyed order. To protect that rule, they prioritized the maintenance of order above anything else. That's why she had discarded her name—to avoid being controlled by her order.

"In this underground world, I performed many a miracle to save as many people as I could. I had saved one thousand lives and ten thousand hearts when I met him—a follower of Jiordal who swore vengeance against the gods for the

murder of his daughter.”

Arcana’s gaze wandered upwards as she recalled what had happened. There was no sky up there, only the dome overhead.

“His daughter was one of the Selected Eight who had been returned to the heavens at the end of the holy war. According to Jiordal’s teachings, sources that depart through the holy war receive salvation. It is a blessing to be celebrated. But his daughter said something to him just before her death.”

Sadness clouded Arcana’s gaze.

“‘I’d rather stay with you than go with the gods, dad,’ she’d said. The man had grieved, rejected Jiordal’s teachings, and resented the Selected One who had killed his daughter. He then came to me begging for them to be punished. He claimed his only salvation was if the killer saw eternal death.”

In order to save the father, the selected candidate who had killed his daughter had needed to be destroyed.

“So what did you do?”

“Back then, I was but a nameless god. Because I wasn’t a Selection God, I couldn’t pass judgment on the Selected Eight. I tried to convince him that revenge couldn’t resolve anything—that his daughter wouldn’t come back to life and that she died wishing for him to live happily.” Arcana paused before continuing. “I told him I would revive his dead daughter.”

“Had her source not been destroyed?”

Arcana looked down and shook her head.

“Not even a god could have revived her,” I said.

“By distorting the order of the Moon of Creation, I can create an identical person with the same heart, the same body, and the same memories. His daughter would be revived—to him, at least.”

“Hmm. So you lied.”

Arcana nodded. “He would be happy as long as he didn’t know. I used Altiertonoa’s power to recreate his daughter because I believed that.”

She stared me straight in the eyes. “He rejoiced. I thought I’d saved him.”

Her face told me that had been a mistake.

“Several months later, he hanged himself. His daughter told me about it between her sobs. The agent of god chosen in the Selection Trial had informed him his daughter was fake. That agent was the man who had murdered his true daughter.”

Arcana bit her lip. She remained silent for a while, with a dark expression on her face.

“Who do you think killed him?” she asked. “Was it the agent who revealed the truth to him while laughing, or should his own heart be blamed for seeking vengeance? No. It was none of these. I was the one who killed him. I tried to save him by creating a fake daughter. What I had believed was salvation had merely been planting the seed of his despair instead.”

She forced her voice out weakly, as though hurt by her own words. “That was my sin. I made a mistake no god should ever make. I wondered how I could save his heart. I could have simply granted his vengeance, but then the agent would have had to die, and that would have been another life lost.”

The reason his daughter had died in the first place was the Selection Trial the gods had begun. Killing the murderer wouldn’t necessarily have been the right plan of action.

“That’s when I finally realized it—that everything was connected. This wasn’t the only incident either. One salvation would only lead to the loss of another. For every person I saved, another would fall through the cracks. The hands of a god couldn’t hold all of their wishes.”

Arcana spoke firmly. “There is no almighty one. Not even the gods are almighty. We cannot save everyone.” That was the conclusion she had reached at the time. “That’s why I hoped I was wrong. I wanted someone to overthrow the answer I’d come up with. Then, when I went to the surface, I learned of you.”

She smiled thinly, as though that discovery had been her own salvation.

“I thought that if you, the Demon King of Tyranny who could destroy gods,

truly had the power to surpass us, then you would have an answer to my question.”

So that was why she had visited me in her magic body.

“Misfit Anos Voldigoad, you are an existence disconnected from order. I will now give you my judgment: you are the true almighty one, the one worthy of becoming the agent of the gods.”

Arcana quietly reached out and touched the Sword of the Almighty in my hands. “Why are we called gods if we cannot save everyone?” she mumbled to herself. “If I cannot save the villains, the criminals, the fools, and the devils, then why am I a god? The gods are just here to protect order; they can’t save anything like this.”

I let go of the sword and rested it horizontally on her hand.

“I wanted to become a kind god that could save everyone. A true god.”

A single teardrop spilled down her cheek.

“That’s what I wanted when I discarded my name. That, I am sure of.”

Arcana gripped the sheath in her left hand and held the hilt in her right.

“But I was wrong. That’s why this defeat at your hands is punishment for my sins, and above all, it is my salvation.” She clenched her right hand. “Goodbye. May you emerge victorious.”

Quietly, she mustered her strength and moved to draw Levyngilma. However, before the Sword of the Almighty could erase her source, I grabbed her right hand and stopped her. Arcana looked at me curiously.

“Watch until the end to see what I do to that irredeemable man that even the gods can’t save.”

Looking confused, Arcana nodded.

“He should be returning soon. What will he say once he’s discarded his beliefs? I can only hope he exceeds my expectations.”

I cast Ei Chael over the dreaming Ahid. His severed limbs grew back, and his wounds were completely healed. He woke up with a gasp.

“How do you feel, crook?” I asked. “Have you become accustomed to rejecting the gods after being betrayed by them so many times? Have you abandoned your faith yet?”

After spending a moment processing my words, Ahid burst into laughter. He sat up, cackling maniacally. “Mua ha ha ha ha! I’ve returned! I’ve returned alive!”

The liberation of being released from a thousand betrayals had sent Ahid into a fit of laughter.

“Hmm. Did you lose your mind?”

“I’m perfectly sane, and I haven’t discarded my faith.”

“You wouldn’t have woken from Nedneliaz without abandoning your faith.”

Ahid smirked. “I discarded the faith in my heart *because* of my belief in the gods. Don’t you see? It’s the same as what you said earlier. If you can use the almighty one’s sword, then I can possess the heart of the almighty one. I discarded my faith while embracing it at the same time.”

Seeing the man was still rotten after a thousand nightmares, I felt the corners of my mouth curl up. “You didn’t disappoint me then. As promised, I will show you one last nightmare.” I looked over at Arcana, who was watching from a short distance away. “Do him one last favor, and tell him who you chose in this Selection Trial.”

“Unfortunately, I have no time for your games right now. I have just received a new divine message,” Ahid said, turning to Arcana himself. “Arcana, my deity, let us retreat for now. We have realized his strength. We know he is a fool who doesn’t understand that dying in the holy war is salvation. If we obtain the power of a new god, we will be able to defeat this heretic. Let us go.”

Ahid extended his hand towards Arcana, but she glanced at it without moving. “I can’t do that,” she said plainly.

“What?!” Ahid was shocked speechless, but he quickly pulled himself together with a twitching smile. “What do you mean by that, my deity? Of course, I am willing to take on any trial you give me. I am a changed man who will bring the people true salvation. Please give me your divine message.” He

kneled before Arcana in prayer.

“My follower, Oracle Ahid Alover Agartz, I chose you as one of the Selected Eight in order to bring you salvation. I believed your hopelessness made you worthy of salvation.”

“I am deeply grateful for your compassion, my Selection God.”

“However, I was mistaken.”

Ahid ceased praying and looked at Arcana in disbelief.

“Mistaken?” he repeated, unable to comprehend what she meant. “What are you saying? A god could never be mistaken.”

“Gods can make mistakes. Gods are neither almighty nor all-knowing. I made a mistake. I shouldn’t have chosen you. Thus, I, the Selection God Arcana, will grant my last words to the Oracle in accordance with our pact.” Arcana gave the irredeemable man a pitying look. “You will never be worthy of being an agent of god. I choose the Misfit, Anos Voldigoad, who overcame the trial of the almighty one. Ahid, I will grant you my judgment: return to being a follower and live earnestly.”

The red flames disappeared from the Selection pledge jewel in Arcana’s hand. Ahid had lost his right as one of the Eight.

He slumped weakly, his gaze wandering out of focus as he sighed. There was a crazed look in his eyes. “Ha... Ha ha ha! HYA HA HA HA HA HA! I see, I see. So it was all a lie Ah, what an unoriginal trick. As expected of a heretic!”

“You’re wrong, Ahid,” Arcana said.

Ahid snorted. “Shut up. A god controlled by their order has no right to order me around. Do you understand? I never trusted the gods in the first place. I merely used you all for my own convenience.”

“Hmm. That’s quite the change.”

“No matter how similar pain is to reality, as long as it’s just a dream, it means nothing to me. If anything, I no longer have to put on the ridiculous show of believing in the gods, so this world is much easier to be in.”

Ahid used Azept and drew a magic circle for Gatom. He seemed to have

summoned a dragon or god that could use Gatom here.

“You may believe you can make me suffer in a world where I have to discard my faith, but your thinking is too shallow. I had no faith in the first place, so that dream was no nightmare to me.” His expression twisted with madness as he laughed. “Now, let’s do this for the 1,001st time. Shall I thrust the truth that there is no Almighty Radiance into the faces of those stupid sheep and that pompous pope? Hopefully it won’t take that long to wake up this time.”

The condition to wake from Nedneliaz was to travel across Jiordial over one thousand times, spreading the word that there was no god. I had set up the dream to require more people to be informed with every iteration, making the difficulty increase as he went.

After all his trial and error, Ahid was now a master at spreading the truth. To see him use that skill on the real people of Jiordal and even the pope would certainly be quite the sight.

“You’d better do your best, then. I doubt things will go the way they have until now.”

Ahid whirled around to glare at me. “There’s no point in speaking to you in this dream, but if the true you is listening, know this: I shall never forgive you, Misfit Anos Voldigoad. I will send you to the depths of hell no matter what it takes. Just wait until I wake up. Heh heh heh... Ha ha ha ha ha!”

He activated the magic circle and disappeared, leaving behind the echo of his laughter.

“Unfortunately for you, Ahid, this nightmare will never end,” I said with a chuckle. In an attempt to wake from this “dream,” he would take various actions to spread the falsity of Equis throughout the kingdom. It was all too easy to imagine how he’d escalate those actions. Once he realized he couldn’t wake up no matter what he did, he would finally get a taste of the true nightmare.

True hell would come once he realized that this wasn’t a dream. What kind of despair would he feel, then? All of it would be the result of his own actions.

“It’s as you can see, Arcana.”

She still seemed worried about the fate of the hopeless man, so I explained.

“I am not a god, and I have no intention of becoming one. I would never save a helpless man like him.” I walked up to her and came to a stop. “If you wish for there to be a kind god who will save everyone, stop placing your expectations on others. Not everyone can forgive the hateful. Not everyone seeks peace. Some like you have kindness that pains their hearts, but I am the exact opposite. I won’t be satisfied until I’ve thrown every fool into the pit of despair at least once.” I looked into Arcana’s clear eyes. “If you still wish to be kind, then you have to become the kind god who will save everyone.”

“I committed an unforgivable sin,” Arcana replied. “I am a god who should be punished.”

“No one has the right to punish someone already seeking to punish themselves.”

“I did something crueler than taking a life,” Arcana said, eyes full of self-admonition. “I created a fake life to destroy someone’s heart and let him die without salvation. Who would believe in a god that has sinned? Who would forgive a god’s sins?”

If there had been anyone out there who could forgive her, it would have been the man who had thrown away his own life. However, what had been destroyed could not be returned. It was impossible.

“I will forgive them.”

Arcana’s eyes widened.

“I will forgive your sins, Selection God Arcana. I will be your shield against all who criticize you in this underground world.”

She gazed at me in amazement.

“Your sins cannot be erased. Even if that person returned to life and time were to be rewound, undoing everything that had happened, your sin would not disappear. Even if you vanished here, your sin would not be erased.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Once you’ve acknowledged your mistake, atone for it for the rest of your life.”

After a moment of silence, she asked, “Can I atone?”

“You’ve been watching this war. You’ve seen Emilia and the Hero Academy students fight.”

Arcana nodded. “You got them back on their feet.”

“That’s wrong. They merely accepted their own sins and chose to move forward in atonement. Their former sins will continue to torment them from here on out. But they’ve realized that they must keep moving forwards anyway. That’s the only thing they can do, since their sins won’t disappear.”

Arcana stared me straight in the eyes.

“Everyone makes mistakes. Humans, demons—everyone lives this way. So how can you, a god, run from your sins?” I held out my hand to Arcana as she tightened her grip around the Sword of the Almighty. “Let me ask you something. What is your atonement? How will you atone for your sin?”

“I...” Her strong will flared within her eyes. She stared at me intensely, as though a fire had been lit inside her. “I want to abolish the Selection Trial. This order isn’t kind to people at all. It’s a sacrificial ceremony created for the convenience of the gods. The daughter’s death and the invasion of Azesion were side effects of the Selection Trial. If this continues, there will be more war. People will die again and again.”

Another teardrop fell quietly to the floor.

“Misfit Anos Voldigoad, you are capable of this. Together, we can put an end to this ceremony. Please allow me to atone.”

I gently took the sword from her hands and drew a magic circle on her palm. The Selection pledge jewel she’d given me appeared in her hand.

“I will believe in you. I will never doubt that kindness of yours.”

Believing in a god—that was the way to form a pact.

“Become my god, Arcana. If you say you wish to atone, then I will forgive your sins.”

A crimson flame lit up within the pledge jewel. The flame represented our oath. Our vow was simple.

“We will crush the Selection Trial.”

Those were the words of forgiveness and atonement I exchanged with the sinful god.

§ 44. Her Repentance

Several days later, at the Hero Academy Arclanisca.

On the final day of the educational exchange, I was walking down the corridor as the Demon King of Tyranny instead of Anosh. The academy, which had been half destroyed by the variant dragon, had been repaired by Eldmed's Iris. The structure was stronger than ever before—and littered with dangerous magic circles he had included for fun.

I came to a stop before the door to the magic library. When I opened it, the students inside turned to me.

"You're..." Raos said, standing up as soon as he saw my face. He was immediately enraged.

Ledriano held up a hand to hold him back. Once he saw Raos had calmed down, he took that hand quietly away.

"I know. I'm fine," Raos muttered.

Heine closed the book he was reading and stood up. "Long time to see. What's the almighty Demon King doing alone in a place like this?"

He was as cocky as ever, but unlike in the past, there was no hostility in his gaze.

"Oh, I'm just here to fulfill the promise I made with Emilia. I was headed for the meeting room, but it seems I made a wrong turn somewhere. See you."

As soon as I turned around, a voice called from behind me.

"Hey! Hold on."

I paused and looked over my shoulder at Raos.

"What promise was that?"

"Hmm. Are you concerned for your demon teacher?"

Raos turned away in a huff. "Not really. That's not it at all."

“Bwa ha ha! To think those wild temperaments of yours have been tamed to this degree. Perhaps I should have expected as much from an instructor from our academy.”

Ledriano swallowed his breath.

“If you’re that curious, I’ll tell you. Emilia was transferred to Arclanisca to restore it to its former glory. I agreed to give her a promotion if she either worked here for one year or made some kind of significant achievement.”

“A promotion...”

“Thanks to Emilia’s efforts, you heroes have regained your pride.”

Raos and the others listened quietly to my explanation.

“The purpose of sending the Demon King Academy’s students on an exchange here was to deal with the dragon infestation. Thanks to Emilia and the Hero Academy’s efforts in drawing the attention of the majority of the dragons, I was able to track down the mastermind of the operation. The corruption in Gairadite will soon be removed. Emilia made a distinguished contribution, so I’ve prepared a position on par with that of the Seven Demon Elders for her.”

Leaving the dazed trio behind, I departed from the library. On my way out, I called back to them. “Oh, that’s right. Try to speak a little more politely when she’s having her big moment. Demons don’t normally care about speech, but she’s one of the few exceptions. Such things should be your specialty as humans, no? Don’t embarrass her unnecessarily.”

After leaving the library, I headed for the meeting room used for welcoming guests, opened the door, and walked in. The excessively large room was furnished with a magnificent desk, an extravagantly embroidered rug, and a luxury sofa. Waiting for me inside was Emilia. She stared at me as I walked in.

“Have a seat,” I said.

“I’m fine like this.”

“Fine, if that’s what you prefer.”

I pulled out the chair behind the desk at the back of the room and sat down. Emilia turned awkwardly to face me. She seemed to fear what I would say.

“I heard you used a large amount of holy water to suppress the dragons.”

“Yes...”

“That was reckless of you. Your body may be suited for hero magic, but you’re still a demon. A body afflicted with stigmas will eventually have its source eaten away. If that had happened, even the curse of reincarnation wouldn’t have saved you.”

Emilia gulped and nodded.

“Why did you fight to the point of laying down your life?”

“I am a teacher,” she said, searching for the right words to answer. “It’s my duty to protect my students.”

“And you fulfilled that duty.”

She nodded awkwardly. “Thank you very much.”

“Hmm. How are the stigmas? I’ll heal them for you if they’re bad.”

Emilia shook her head. “Anosh... I mean, a student of the Demon King Academy healed them for me. They’re no longer any problem.”

It seemed there’d been no side effects after that, then.

“Can I ask you something?” Emilia said.

“What?”

“Who is he? He’s abnormally strong for a demon. Perhaps you know something.”

Of course she would question that. It was only natural to wonder if Anosh had some kind of connection to me.

“Anosh Polticoal, was it? Indeed, his magic is something else—so much so that he almost reminds me of my younger self. If he decides to lead a revolt once he grows up, he could sow the seeds of a new war. It’s as you suspect—I placed him nearby to keep an eye on him.”

Emilia glared at me fiercely, as though she was holding back her anger. “You’re not planning on eliminating him before he exceeds you, are you?”

I chuckled. “That’s an interesting thing to say. Anosh Polticoal, exceeding me? That won’t happen, Emilia. Not in a million years.”

Her glare sharpened as she tried to ascertain my true intentions. Perhaps my choice of words was poor—she seemed convinced I was planning on eliminating Anosh in the future.

“I’m sure he’s nothing like how you were in your youth.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

“Unlike you, Anosh is a kind demon. He would never wave the flag of revolt in Dilhade.”

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Emilia gave me a puzzled look. “What’s so funny? Why all the laughter?”

Hmm. I’d laughed in spite of myself. Well, whatever.

“I’m just surprised by how trusting you are of a child you’ve only just met.”

“Unlike you, I’ve met him in person. Anosh is smart, pure, and kind. With proper guidance, he’ll make a wonderful demon lord. He’ll be even better than you.”

It was a little embarrassing to be praised this much, but that didn’t mean I should reveal myself. “You’ve become a proper teacher, Emilia,” I said.

“Are you demanding my gratitude?”

“I’m saying you’re keeping a close eye on your students. You should turn those unclouded Magic Eyes on me too once in a while.”

Emilia turned to face away for a brief moment, but she soon changed her mind and looked back. There was a look of determination on her face.

“I have something to say to the Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad,” she said. Unlike during our idle chatter until now, she was now speaking officially to me as the Demon King.

“You may speak,” I said.

She knelt before me and bowed her head. “I made a mistake. I wrongly believed royals were superior because we had more noble blood. Because of

that, I treated you with hostility, plotted your mother's demise, and attempted to kill my own students."

Every one of her words was laced with guilt and regret. To someone attempting to face forward and live respectably, those sins weighed heavily on her shoulders. She would never forgive herself if she made light of them.

"Despite my sins, you offered me your hand. You gave me the chance to realize my mistakes."

The fact that she was kneeling and bowing before someone she had once detested so much was proof that she was doing it because she truly wanted to.

"I am most grateful to you, my liege, but at the same time, there is something else I wish to apologize for."

"Let's hear it."

"I will atone for this sin in whichever way you wish. I will kiss your feet and endure any torture you wish to inflict upon me, but I ask that you please spare my life."

"State your reason."

"There is something I still have to do. Once I'm done, you may do with me as you wish."

"And if I say no?"

She raised her head with resolution. "It is my sin to bear. I merely ask that you grant me the time to put my affairs in order."

I smiled naturally in response. "I have already punished you. There is no need to atone any further," I said.

Emilia stared at me in confusion.

"I retract my words about never forgiving you."

"Weren't you going to torment me once I accepted my guilt?"

I chuckled. "Do you think of me as some kind of savage or brute?"

"No, but you are the Demon King of Tyranny."

A laugh burst out of me in spite of myself. It seemed that her reincarnation as a hybrid had been quite the traumatic experience for her. It was no wonder her manner was still so stiff even after she'd admitted her sins.

"What's passed is past. Don't worry about it. What's important is the promise I made to you. Do you still remember?"

"Yes, I do."

"You've fulfilled your duty to a satisfactory degree. The former Jerga-Kanon students have regained their pride, and humankind was able to exterminate the dragons with its own power. It may be a small step for them, but that step will trigger the revival of the nation that had been under Jerga's spell for two thousand years. Well done."

Oddly enough, Emilia didn't show any signs of joy or relief. Instead, her face stiffened as though she was preparing for the worst.

"I have no intention of leaving an excellent subordinate idle. As promised, I have prepared a position of equal standing to that of the Seven Demon Elders for you."

"L-Lord Anos, um, I—"

Just as she was about to say something, the door to the meeting room flew open.

"Wait!"

With Raos, Ledriano, and Heine in the lead, a group of students in scarlet uniforms came rushing into the room. Every last student Emilia was in charge of had come running.

§ 45. Where She Belongs

Emilia got to her feet at the sight of her students. She ran over to them and turned to Raos, who was at the front of the group.

“What’s going on? What’s everyone doing here?”

But she didn’t receive an immediate response. Raos stared at Emilia like he was trying to find the right words to say.

“Well, I’m in the middle of an important conversation, so please wait in the classroom. I’ll be there soon,” Emilia said, placing her hand on Raos’s shoulder. “Now, off you go.”

She tried to nudge him and the others out of the room, but he grabbed her wrist instead of leaving.

“Don’t...please...” Raos muttered quietly.

“Raos? Is something the matter?”

Raos raised his head higher and yelled, “Don’t quit! Please!” He looked at Emilia pleadingly. “I know we were hopeless students and that you’ll be able to live a much easier life if you go back to your homeland. We really have no right to be saying this to the one person who showed us kindness, but even so...!” He clenched his fists. “We don’t want you to leave. Please stay here, Ms. Emilia!”

Emilia stared at him in surprise.

“You were the only person who took us seriously after we found out we weren’t heroes. You’re the only one who scolded us time and time again. You were the only one who told us to run when we thought death was the only option left!” Raos grasped Emilia’s hand tightly. “You’re the only one we have, Ms. Emilia! We were only able to face that ridiculous number of dragons because you said you’d never run. We wouldn’t have been able to muster the courage by ourselves. Without you, we’ll return to being hopeless pieces of trash! I don’t want to go back to that lousy version of myself!”

With tears welling in his eyes, Raos pleaded to her. “I don’t want that.”

“Ms. Emilia,” Ledriano said, stepping forward, “we still have so much more to learn from you.” He was also addressing her as ‘Ms. Emilia’ for the first time. “We should have respected your words and your pride. It took us some time to realize as much, but we know now that this is just the beginning! We were too embarrassed to say it out loud, but we all discussed doing our best from now on so that you’d be surprised and proud of us.” Ledriano’s gaze was one of complete earnesty. “We wish for you to be the one to guide us from now on. We want to become true heroes for your sake.”

“M-Ms. Emilia,” Heine said, on the verge of crying, “it’s all my fault. This is all because I slacked off in the bathroom and made fun of you every day. I’ll do better from now on. I’ll go to class properly, wait until lunch to eat, and take all my tests seriously!”

Unlike the students of the Demon King Academy, these students were actually young. They’d only been in their teens when they’d been sweet-talked into becoming heroes and had their minds toyed by Jerga’s will. They had been unable to trust anyone around them until they had finally met someone worthy of being called a teacher—someone they could trust from the bottom of their hearts.

After living their lives under the control of other adults, they must have found her presence a blessing. Now, they knew they couldn’t let go of her. They had felt firsthand just how much they needed her.

“We’ll become good heroes, so please, please, stay and watch over us until then, Ms. Emilia!” the students pleaded.

Emilia was slow to respond. She had already made a promise with me before coming here. “If that were possible, I would have loved to do that, but...”

When she turned to look back at me, Ledriano marched past her.

“Ledriano!” she called.

Ledriano came to a stop before me and knelt. He bowed his head low as he said, “Please allow me to speak, Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad.”

“Go on.”

“I beg of you, please allow our teacher, Emilia Ludwell, to stay here for a little longer.”

The students of the Hero Academy all lined up before me and knelt.

“With her guidance, we’ll acquire enough strength to be of benefit to Dilhade,” Raos added.

“We will swear our lives and loyalty to you,” Heine said boldly. “We will obey your every order. So please grant us this one mercy and allow her to remain here until we graduate.”

Every last student bowed before me. The humans who had been taught that demons were the enemy were going so far for their demon teacher. There wasn’t a single ounce of Jerga’s influence left in them. They had seen things with their own eyes and used their own heads to come to this conclusion.

“Lord Anos.” Emilia stepped forward and joined the kneeling students. Then she lowered her head until it was pressed against the ground. “Thank you for calling me an excellent subordinate. I am unworthy of such an honor. However, I have learned something during my time here in Azesion: a position equal to the Seven Demon Elders is too great for me.”

In order to protect what mattered to her the most, Emilia kept her head lowered. This was her fight.

“You may punish me in any way you see fit for breaking our agreement. You may exile me from my homeland for the rest of my life. I have only one wish. Please allow me the opportunity to keep teaching them. I will raise them into fine heroes and build a foundation of friendship between Dilhade and Azesion. The tragedy of the war two thousand years ago will never occur again.”

“Raise your head.”

Emilia slowly looked up at me. Her expression was heroic. She had no fear of whatever punishment I could give her. This was her resolution towards her beliefs and towards her students.

Suddenly, a voice unfitting of the situation yelled from the doorway.

“Fools! What is the meaning of this? How dare you all lower your heads to the

leader of the enemy nation!”

It was the haughty Headmaster Zamira.

“And what is this about swearing loyalty to the Demon King after your graduation? Can you hear yourselves?! This is treachery! You will all be sentenced to death for treason! Is that what you want?”

Unable to overlook those words, Emilia rose to her feet. “Headmaster Zamira, please refrain from making such lawless statements. None of that is considered treason, nor will there be a death penalty over it. The laws of Azesion state they are free to live and work wherever they wish.”

But Zamira’s face distorted with displeasure. “Headmaster? Who do you think you’re speaking to, lowly teacher?!” He puffed out his overweight chest. “I am the 107th King of Gairadite, Zamira Engelo Gairadite. Azesion is my kingdom, and I am the law.”

Emilia was speechless. The students of the Hero Academy frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s simple: the entire royal family, King Lycius included, is dead. The only one left with the right to succeed the throne was myself. Now lower your head, demon.”

Emilia clenched her teeth.

“Hmm? What’s that rebellious look for? I can close the Hero Academy if I so wish. After all, my kingdom has no need for a school of traitors. Well? What do you say?”

With a look of complete humiliation, Emilia started to kneel. I gently grasped her trembling shoulder and stopped her.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the Demon King of Tyranny. Shouldn’t you berate your follower for failing to kneel before the king of another nation?”

“You consider yourself king? What a thickheaded man.”

“What?!”

As Zamira’s face twisted unpleasantly, another voice echoed from the desk in

the room.

“You knew everything all along, Zamira Engelo.”

It was the crystal clear voice of a god in the form of a girl.

“The first person Ahid made contact with was you. Despite knowing the risks, you introduced King Lycius to him. You despised the king and conspired to murder him.”

Arcana had appeared in the seat by the desk.

“There’s no need to play dumb. I know everything.”

“I see.” He took one look at Arcana and realized making excuses would be futile. “I see, I see, I see. Indeed, there is no need to play dumb.” He nodded in agreement and said defiantly, “It is true. I was the one who arranged the deaths of the royal family.”

“You royals released dragons across Azesion so that they’d attack the people. You colluded with Jiordal, Kingdom of the Divine Dragon, in an attempt to kill Hero Kanon. You did all this to steal the Sword of Three Races and declare yourself the hero instead.”

“Actually, that was all King Lycius’s idea, but it’s true I turned a blind eye. If either side fell, it would only place me closer to the throne.”

Zamira ranted on, boasting about his success. “While we’re at it, I also colluded with the previous headmaster, Diego. I knew you foolish students were being brainwashed by Jerga, but I kept out of it. I was hoping the number of royals would be reduced through war with Dilhade. It didn’t work out back then, but luckily, another chance came around eventually.”

“Hmm. So you consider yourself lucky after revealing so much?”

Zamira smiled with a leer. “Fool. There’s no proof of any of it. Who would believe the words of demons and failed heroes? I can merely announce that the Hero Kanon who visited was a fake.”

Drunk on the power he had obtained, Zamira spoke boldly. “And what can you do about that, Demon King? Kill me? Our nations have formed an alliance. It may be easy for you to take my life, but doing so would result in another war.

Is that what you truly want? Hmm?”

“Indeed, I won’t lay my hands on you. No matter how rotten this nation is, that’s a problem for its own people. Dilhade is unrelated.”

“Ha ha ha! That’s exactly right. Some Demon King of Tyranny you are! This is not the age of violence. Idiots who boast of their strength are worthless!”

Just then, a voice could be heard.

“It is true. I was the one who arranged the deaths of the royal family.”

It was clearly Zamira’s own voice.

“What?!” Zamira looked around the room as his voice called out again.

“Actually, that was all King Lycius’s idea. But it’s true I turned a blind eye. If either side fell, it would only place me closer to the throne.”

Arcana was using Limnet to broadcast the footage of what had just taken place.

“What... What is that?!”

“The magicast being shown all across Azesion as we speak.”

Zamira paled, but he soon returned to his senses and yelled, “I-It’s all a fabrication! This room is surrounded by a powerful magic ward made of holy water. You shouldn’t be able to use Limnet or any other recording spells!”

“That feeble anti-magic couldn’t do anything. Just so you know, the footage of you negotiating with Ahid was playing up until now. He must have recorded it with the intention of blackmailing you later.”

Zamira looked shell-shocked. His voice played from the magic broadcast once again.

“While we’re at it, I also colluded with the previous headmaster Diego. I knew the foolish students were being brainwashed by Jerga, but I kept out of it. I was hoping the number of royals would be reduced through war with Dilhade. It didn’t work out back then, but luckily, another chance came around eventually.”

“Now, the corruption of this kingdom is this kingdom’s problem. I won’t lift a hand, but what will the people of Gairadite think?”

The next image shown on Limnet was of the entrance to the royal palace. Hundreds of Gairadite's citizens were marching towards the gate.

"What is the meaning of this?! Bring Zamira out here at once!"

"My hometown was destroyed by dragons! Are you saying that was because of the palace?!"

"We've had enough of you! If you want war so badly, step out of those doors!"

"Yeah! We'll take you on! Send out Zamira!"

"Where is he?! We're sick of the way you royals run things!"

"That's right! We won't let you get away with this! Hey, get out here right now!"

"I'll kill you myself! Get out here!"

Shouts of rage filled the air. The soldiers holding back the people were at their limit—the palace gate wouldn't hold them back for much longer.

"C-Curse you, Demon King. Using such despicable methods... I won't forget this!"

With those parting words, Zamira fled from the meeting room—and ran straight into a group of armored soldiers outside the door.

"Oh, good timing. You've come to pick me up, right? Good grief, what a disaster. I'll need to lie low for a while. Well, I might as well take a vacation. Hey, you lot! Prepare someplace suitable for me!"

The soldiers thrust their spears at him.

"Wha—?!"

His arms were soon restrained.

"Wh-What are you doing? Who do you think I am?! I am the king! Cease this insolence!"

"Unfortunately, you are no longer our nation's king."

The ministers and nobility of Azesion had arrived.

“You betrayed our nation, murdered the royal family, and attempted to take the lives of our people. Zamira Engelo, you are to be charged for treason!”

“W-Wait! Don’t be deceived. This is all part of the Demon King’s scheme! If you do this, Dilhade will— Gah!”

One of the ministers had punched Zamira with all his might.

“We were already fed up with the corruption of the royal family. As you have requested, we will prepare someplace suitable for you.” The minister glared at Zamira. “In prison.”

“Th-The insolence! Who do you think protected this nation until now? If it weren’t for royalty, this kingdom would be in ruins!”

“All you have to worry about is the day you’re sent to the gallows. Take him away!”

The soldiers dragged Zamira off.

“Stop! Unhand me! I am the king! Stooop!”

The ministers and nobility retreated. One of the group paused and bowed to me on his way past. It was Igareth. Before his reincarnation, he had gone around as a human and sounded out all the decent-minded people in the royal palace, which had laid the groundwork for Zamira’s arrest.

“Well done,” I said.

“I will report back to you later,” Igareth said before leaving.

“Now then.”

I turned around to see Emilia and the others staring at me, dumbfounded. Their minds had yet to catch up with the dizzying events that had just occurred.

“Continuing from where we just left off, Emilia, as promised, I have prepared a position for you.”

“Like I said, that’s...” she mumbled hesitantly. Although she had appealed to remain at the Hero Academy, she wasn’t in a position to stubbornly deny my decision. In the first place, this had all been suggested by Emilia herself. She couldn’t just back out and say she’d changed her mind. As a teacher, she had to

set an example for her students.

“As you just witnessed, the position of headmaster has just become vacant in Arclanisca. Unfortunately, a replacement is yet to be found. The royal palace has to deal with the end of the royal bloodline and will have no time to spare here. However, the ministers would be extremely troubled if the only institution capable of exterminating dragons were to be left with no one in charge, especially should the beasts appear again. And so, I told them I had the perfect candidate for the job, one who was already highly regarded by her students.”

Emilia gasped then straightened herself and looked at me solemnly.

“I was also able to learn something by watching how you atoned for your sins. I ask that you give back the knowledge you have cultivated during your harsh days by serving this land.”

Emilia knelt before me. The students of the Hero Academy knelt beside her, lowering their heads.

“Emilia Ludwell, I am appointing you Headmaster of the Hero Academy Arclanisca. Having lost their royal family, Azesion is about to embark on a long and arduous trial. You are to educate the treasures of this nation so that they may overcome it.”

She bowed her head low and said, “I humbly accept this appointment.”

§ Epilogue: Promised Reunion

The students of both the Hero Academy and the Demon King Academy were gathered in Arclanisca's auditorium. On the teacher's podium stood Eldmed, Shin, and Emilia. The final class of the education exchange had just concluded.

"With this, the educational exchange has come to an end. Oh, what a worthwhile trip this has been! The growth of the Hero Academy students was especially wondrous." Eldmed rested his hands on his cane and turned his Magic Eyes towards the students. "Be proud of yourselves. Your courage to fight for your comrades in the face of death is proof beyond doubt that you are heroes. Your feelings are just as strong as those of the humans of two thousand years ago."

The Hero Academy students looked triumphant as they listened to the Conflagration King's parting speech.

"While it was only for a brief period, you all did your best to keep up with my classes. And so, I have prepared a small farewell gift."

Eldmed tapped his cane against the floor, activating Limnet on the blackboard. A voice started playing from the footage.

"Everyone, please listen without lowering your guard."

Emilia whirled around to stare at the blackboard in shock. It was her own voice playing over the broadcast.

"You have all studied demons before. You should know what demon royalty means."

She rushed over to Eldmed. "What is this, Mr. Eldmed?! What are you doing?!"

"Bwa ha ha! Outstanding work, isn't it? I spent the whole night editing the footage I'd recorded. It's already streaming on Gairadite's magicast."

"What?!"

“Having lost their royal family, Gairadite will abolish their monarchy and convert to a republic with a council.” Eldmed pointed his cane at Emilia and laughed. “In such a case, shouldn’t the people be informed of who it was that risked their lives to protect this city?”

“Please, wait a minute. I have no idea what you mean. How is that council related to me? To start with, I’m a demon.”

The Conflagration King heartily laughed off her concerns. “If a demon were to become a member of Azesion’s council, they would have to be elected by the people themselves. What better symbol of peace could one ask for?” He lowered his cane once again. “That is what the Demon King of Tyranny believes, anyway,” he said.

“W-Wait a moment. I’m the new headmaster of the Hero Academy, aren’t I? I already have so much to learn. I can’t just—”

“Hey now, there’s no need to panic. It will take time for the nation to switch systems. You merely have to prepare for when it happens.”

Emilia faltered under Eldmed’s forceful tone. “That doesn’t mean I can do it.”

“Indeed, holding two positions at once will be tiring. Also, as a demon, you will be subject to much harsher criticism. When it comes to the wiles of politics, you’ll have to learn how to stand up to the sly old dogs who’ve been doing this all their lives. The stress alone will be enough to open a hole in your stomach and make you throw up blood.”

Eldmed grinned wickedly. “According to the Demon King of Tyranny, this is the most suitable position he could prepare for you.”

Emilia glared in the direction of Dilhade. “Didn’t you say you’d forgive me?” she muttered bitterly.

“So, what will you do? If you can’t handle it, I can explain that to the Demon King, but who knows what that man will say in return. I might even get killed in the cross fire! Bwa ha ha! Well, it won’t be your fault. It’ll be my fault for failing to persuade you! Do as you wish! Live your life the way you want!”

“I get it already! I just have to do it, right?! Fine, but in exchange, I won’t take any responsibility if I fail to be elected.”

“A prompt answer! How marvelous. That’s the Ms. Emilia I know.”

Emilia sighed tiredly, but when she lifted her head, she had a bright look on her face. She had been wanting a chance to atone for her sins. However, considering her personality, she would likely resent me for foisting more troubles onto her. Well, at least that was better than having her act meek around me.

“Can you tell the Demon King something for me?”

“What is it?”

“Tell him I am grateful and that I will serve him as a loyal subordinate, but I will never approve of his high-handed way of doing things! He’ll mess up one day and regret it, and I look forward to the day *I* have to save *him*. He’ll be indebted to me when that happens!”

Hearing that, I couldn’t help but smile. Hmm. Yes, spitefully clapping back suited Emilia best.

“Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha! Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!” Eldmed laughed, making Emilia draw back in alarm.

“Um, M-Mr. Eldmed...?”

“Oh, how wonderful! I couldn’t have asked for anything better! The Demon King has gained not only a loyal follower, but an ally capable of disagreeing with him and voicing their opinions! As expected of the Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad. Just how far will he go?!” he shouted at the ceiling. The next moment, he looked back down at the students seriously. “Now, shall we get moving?”

He drew the magic circle for Gatom on a free blackboard.

“Our destination is the front gate of Delsgade. Classes have concluded for today, so the students of the Demon King Academy may head straight home and rest.”

Finally, he looked at the Hero Academy students one last time.

“Students of the Hero Academy, keep striving forward, for your hearts have endless potential within them! One day, you will all be strong enough to

become threats to the Demon King of Tyranny. I, the Conflagration King, will eagerly look forward to that da— Gaaah!”

The Conflagration King was strangled by Zecht as he teleported away. One after another, the students of the Demon King Academy began activating their Gatom.

“Say, there’s something that’s been bothering me. Can I ask you something?” Sasha said from beside me.

“What is it?”

“Are you going to bring her back to Dilhade?”

She looked over at the tiny god standing behind me.

Arcana opened her mouth. “For the duration of the Selection Trial, Selection Gods cannot return to the Divine Realm. That being said, there shouldn’t be a problem if you just leave me somewhere out of the way. I can be summoned immediately when a holy war begins.”

Misha tilted her head in thought. “Somewhere out of the way?”

“Are you going to leave her under the castle?” Sasha asked.

“I’ll explain later. Let’s head to my house.”

“Oh, okay.”

Sasha backed down reluctantly, while Misha nodded. Then the two drew their own Gatom magic circles. I looked over to the Hero Academy students to see Eleonore and Zeshia bidding the heroes farewell.

“Don’t be so reckless from now on. And one of you should learn how to use Ingall. At this rate, you won’t be able to revive after death.”

“Dying without dying...is the basics of the basics.”

Raos pulled a face. “You guys are absurd.”

“It would be nice if we could get a teacher here to teach us how to use it,” Ledriano said, lifting his glasses up.

“Okay, I’ll ask! Someone like Mr. Shin might be a bit ruthless though. Would that be okay?”

Ledriano glanced over at the teacher's podium, from which Shin returned his gaze with a cold glare. "A kind teacher would be preferable."

"Oh, you guys don't know. Despite how he looks, Mr. Shin is a devoted husband and really kind!"

"He'll kill you gently...without any time for pain."

Ledriano laughed dryly.

"Anyways, I'll see what I can do! That just leaves..." Eleonore looked around at the Demon King Academy's students and spotted Lay among them. "Are you sure you don't want to greet Kanon? I can introduce him to you!"

She lifted a finger cheerfully.

"It's fine," Heine muttered.

"Really? I thought you were a huge fan of Kanon, Heine."

"Sh-Shut up! As if I'd like him! Stop bringing up ancient history and go home already."

He tried to shoo them away with a wave of his hand.

"Zeshia's...not a dog."

"There's no need to be shy!"

"I said it's fine!" Heine turned away in a huff.

"Yeah," Raos agreed. "Not when the descendants he risked his life to protect two thousand years ago are this pathetic."

Ledriano nodded. "First, we have to become heroes worthy of greeting him."

"I see. Okay, then. Well, we'll see you later! Take care."

"You too."

Eleonore and Zeshia rejoined us.

"They said they're too embarrassed," Eleonore whispered to Lay. He smiled in his usual refreshing way.

"I can understand how they feel though."

“Really?”

“I can’t go up to them like I’m a hero either.”

Eleonore nodded though she probably didn’t quite understand what he meant. Zeshia also nodded beside her, but she was likely even more clueless.

“Well, whatever. Let’s go home.”

Eleonore used Gatom, teleporting both herself and Zeshia.

“Shall we go too?” Lay asked, offering Misa his hand.

“Ah, h-hold on a minute. I left something behind.”

“What is it?”

“Um, the thing you gave me.”

The one-shell necklace was missing from Misa’s neck.

“I’m sorry. I took it off in the courtyard to look at it, so I think I left it there. I’ll be right back!”

“Is this what you’re talking about?”

Misa turned around to see Heine holding his hand out to her. The one-shell necklace was resting on his palm.

“I found it in the courtyard and picked it up. It would’ve been bad luck if someone stepped on it.”

“Ah, that’s it! Oh, thank you so much!” Misa beamed happily as she accepted the one-shell necklace. Raos and Ledriano came up behind him.

“Thank you,” Lay said.

Heine averted his gaze awkwardly. “It was nothing.”

“It was a fun exchange.” Lay extended his hand for Heine to shake.

“Man, it was no joke. I can’t even count how many times I died. The Demon King Academy is just too strong. Even your teachers are monsters. It’s sickening.”

Despite his complaints, Heine hesitantly shook Lay’s hand.

Lay smiled wryly. “But I don’t think I can take the holy sword away from you anymore.”

Heine blinked in surprise.

“See you later.”

As Lay let go of his hand, he and Misa drew the magic circle for Gatom.

“Say...” Heine muttered just before they teleported away, “what do I have to do...to be like you?”

Lay grinned cheerfully and looked over at the footage of the Hero Academy’s battle playing on the blackboard. “You know, the first time I fought a dragon, I was nowhere near as brave as you. I didn’t even win.”

Heine looked at Lay in shock.

“Two thousand years ago, after the Great War ended, I was killed by the very people I’d sworn to protect. But, although I was betrayed, I still believed in humanity.” Lay spoke to him gently. “This academy was established via the ill intentions of humanity two thousand years ago. It was built to destroy the demons—to wage war two thousand years later. Cultivated over two thousand years, Jerga’s ill will still lingers across Azesion. The royal palace rotted to the brink of destroying the nation. I often wondered if humans would always make the most foolish choice.”

As the former Hero Kanon, Lay wanted to convey this to them.

“I wasn’t always a hero. That’s what other people used to call me. I couldn’t stop them. I couldn’t stop what they did to me. However...” He looked at Heine, then at Ledriano and Raos behind them. “There are true heroes in this era, and so many of you too. There are those who picked up the sword in order to protect others. None of you lost to Jerga’s malice.” Faint tears welled in his eyes. “I’m glad I was able to protect the people of today. Thank you.”

Lay extended his hand for Raos and Ledriano to shake as well.

“A hero of old has no place in this peaceful era, in a nation trying to change itself for the better. But there’s one thing I’d like you to keep in mind: if a disaster beyond your means were to ever befall Azesion, Hero Kanon will gladly

take up the holy sword and fight again.”

The three of them nodded.

“We’ll remember,” Ledriano said.

“We’ll make sure that day doesn’t come,” Raos agreed.

“I’m willing to believe that,” Lay said. He looked at the youth raised in the days he had protected with a proud look in his eyes. Immature as they were now, he believed without a doubt that the buds of their hearts would one day bloom brightly. “Oh, that’s right. I do have one piece of advice for you.”

The heroes nodded with serious expressions.

“You should experience falling in love if you can.”

The heroes looked confused.

“There must be someone you’re interested in, no?”

After a brief pause...

“I...I have no idea what you could mean.”

“Not a clue. Nope.”

“Ha ha... The great Hero sure likes to joke around.”

The gazes of the three heroes darted about nervously. They all glanced over at Emilia, who was still on the teacher’s podium, for a brief instant.

“Anosh!” she called.

She had just finished bidding farewell to the students of the Demon King Academy when she came running over to me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah, no, nothing’s wrong. Um, have you seen the girls around? The girls in the Demon King’s Choir, that is. I heard you were close with them.”

“Ellen and the others had official business to attend to, so they left early.”

Emilia looked slightly disappointed. “I see. That’s a pity.”

“Did you need something?”

“There’s something I need to apologize to them for, but it’s fine. Once things have settled down a bit, I’ll visit Dilhade myself. There are other people I need to apologize to too. Speaking of which, Anosh...” She stared into my face before hesitantly opening her mouth. “Can I see you again when I do?”

When I remained silent, she hurriedly began to explain herself.

“Oh, it’s just because I want to check that you’re studying properly. Now that I’ve taught you, I’ll always consider you my student,” she mumbled, her head drooping low. “I know you might think of me as just another noisy teacher...”

“I’ll look forward to it.”



Emilia's face lit up, and she beamed from ear to ear.

"I'd like to hear more about canned food too."

"In that case, I'll prepare higher quality canned food next time."

I nodded, then pointed at the Bell of Thoughts around Emilia's neck. "If you need anything, speak into the bell. If anything happens, you'll be able to reach me through Leaks."

"No, I wouldn't contact you like that..."

"Do as you wish." I drew the magic circle for Gatom. "See you soon."

"Take care. Come visit Azesion again sometime."

"I will."

The world around me turned white as I teleported. But just before I did...

"S-Say, isn't the atmosphere around them a little different from normal?"

"You must be imagining things. He's only six years old. That's just how she interacts with children, no?"

"Ha ha, right? It couldn't be anything else."

The three heroes continued muttering in confusion.

The world returned to color as my vision cleared.

"AWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Someone screamed, grabbed me tightly, and squeezed—of course, it was mom.

"What's wrong, Anos?! Why are you so tiny? Has your work as the Demon King been a little hard on you? It's okay! You're only six months old. You don't have to work! Just stay home and relax!"

Misha and Sasha, who had teleported here first, backed away from mom at the height of her enthusiasm. I thought they'd grown used to her antics by now, but it seemed that my turning into a six-year-old had induced more excitement than she could handle.

"Oh?"

While she carried me in her arms, mom's gaze landed on the other girl with us.

"Did you make another friend, Anos?"

"I am Arcana, the Selection God who chose Anos," Arcana said peacefully. She was releasing a bit of her divine magic to prove her identity, but mom didn't have Magic Eyes to see that.

"I picked her up on our trip," I said.

"Picked her up? Anos, dear, you know you shouldn't be picking girls up, right?" mom said, admonishing me while patting my head.

"She said she can't go home while the Selection Trial's still underway."

"I don't know what a Selection Trial is, dear. Wait, did you say you chose Anos?" mom asked Arcana.

Arcana nodded. "Anos is worthy of being an agent."

"An agent?" Mom paled and then gasped. "You mean like in a court trial?!"

"That's an attorney," Misha mumbled, but mom couldn't be stopped.

"Anos, did you get into some kind of trouble?!"

"The original man she was contracted to was so awful, I took her from him."

"An affair?!" Mom looked horrified.

"I'll explain the details later. She'll be living here for a while."

"WHAT?! YOU WANT TO LIVE TOGETHER?!" Mom reeled backwards. "D-Don't tell me. You turned back into a six-year-old just to ask me that? Did you think I'd agree to anything just because you look adorable?! As your mother, I will not—"

"Please?"

Mom clutched her chest. "I will not let you handle everything by yourselves! Just leave it to me, Arcana. Let's face this trial together. I know plenty of good agents!"

"Plenty of agents...?" Arcana blinked in confusion.

Mom was probably talking about lawyers.

“W-Wait, are you trying to win custody or something?” mom asked with fear.

“The Selection Trial is for the purpose of deciding custody.”

Mom placed me back on the floor and clenched her fists to encourage Arcana. “I-It’ll be okay. Let’s win the Selection Trial together. I’ll be on your side, Arcana! I won’t leave a child in the custody of a horrible man! That would be unforgivable!”

She was driven by righteous indignation.

“Pfft.”

Sasha shot me a sharp glare. “What are you laughing at?”

“It feels like I’m finally back. There truly is no place like home.”

“Stop accepting all her misunderstandings and correct her already. What are you going to do about that?”

At any rate, with this, Arcana’s place of residence had been secured. She could have lived beneath the Demon King Castle too, but it was better to keep her nearby. There was still a chance that the other Selection Gods and their candidates could target us at any moment.

“I believe the Selection Trial is wrong. That’s why I want to put an end to it,” Arcana told mom earnestly.

“Oh, I know, I know. I also believe a system that separates parents from their children until the trial concludes is wrong. We’ll wrap up the trial as fast as possible and go get them.”

Mom was as formidable as ever. Not even the gods could dispel her misunderstandings without a fight.

“Anos!”

The door to the workshop flew open, and there stood dad.

“I heard what happened, Anos! Just because you’ve become the Demon King doesn’t mean you can lay your hands on a married woman!” Dad leaned into my face, holding back bitter tears. “Or you’ll make me so, so envious!”

“Pfft. Bwa ha ha ha!”

Good grief. Only my family would mistake the Selection Trial for family court.

The End

Afterword

I believe I touched upon this a little in the afterword of the first volume, but this series was built around the concept of making the last boss the main character instead. Therefore, even when writing cliché episodes, I try to depict things from a slightly different angle.

One tried-and-true cliché of fantasy stories is when the main characters require growth to overcome a setback. When handling setbacks in this series, however, I have to consider whether the wall they run into is a wall worthy of stunting the Demon King. Because of that, I tried shifting perspectives and making Anos take on the role of setting his enemies back instead. By depicting things from that perspective, I could still write cliché episodes in a Demon King Academy-like way.

Thus, this volume became centered on Emilia.

In volume two, Emilia was convinced she was a superior demon due to her pure blood. However, she was punished by the founder himself and faced a huge setback. Now, in volume five, she has to grow and face that setback. I hope you enjoyed how the clumsy plan she came up with served her well in the end!

The brilliant cover illustration and inserts of this volume were once again drawn by Shizumayoshinori. Thank you very much. I was eagerly awaiting the day the Bik Inni scene was illustrated.

I'm also greatly indebted to my editor, Yoshioka. Thank you for all your detailed advice and suggestions.

The next volume will focus primarily on the underground world. You'll get a more detailed image of the underground culture, and some unexpected people might play more active roles. Also, someone close to Anos will make an appearance. Volume six prompted a lot of surprised reactions during the web novel release, so I hope you'll look forward to it.

Finally, to the readers of this volume, I offer you my deepest gratitude. Thank you very much. I will continue revising the next volume to bring you an interesting story, so please keep up the support.

SHU

2 September 2019



story by †

SHU

illustrated by †

Shizumayoshinori

The Misfit of Demon King Academy

5



"Do I look good?"

Misha Necron
A quiet and reserved classmate and Anos's first friend after his reincarnation.

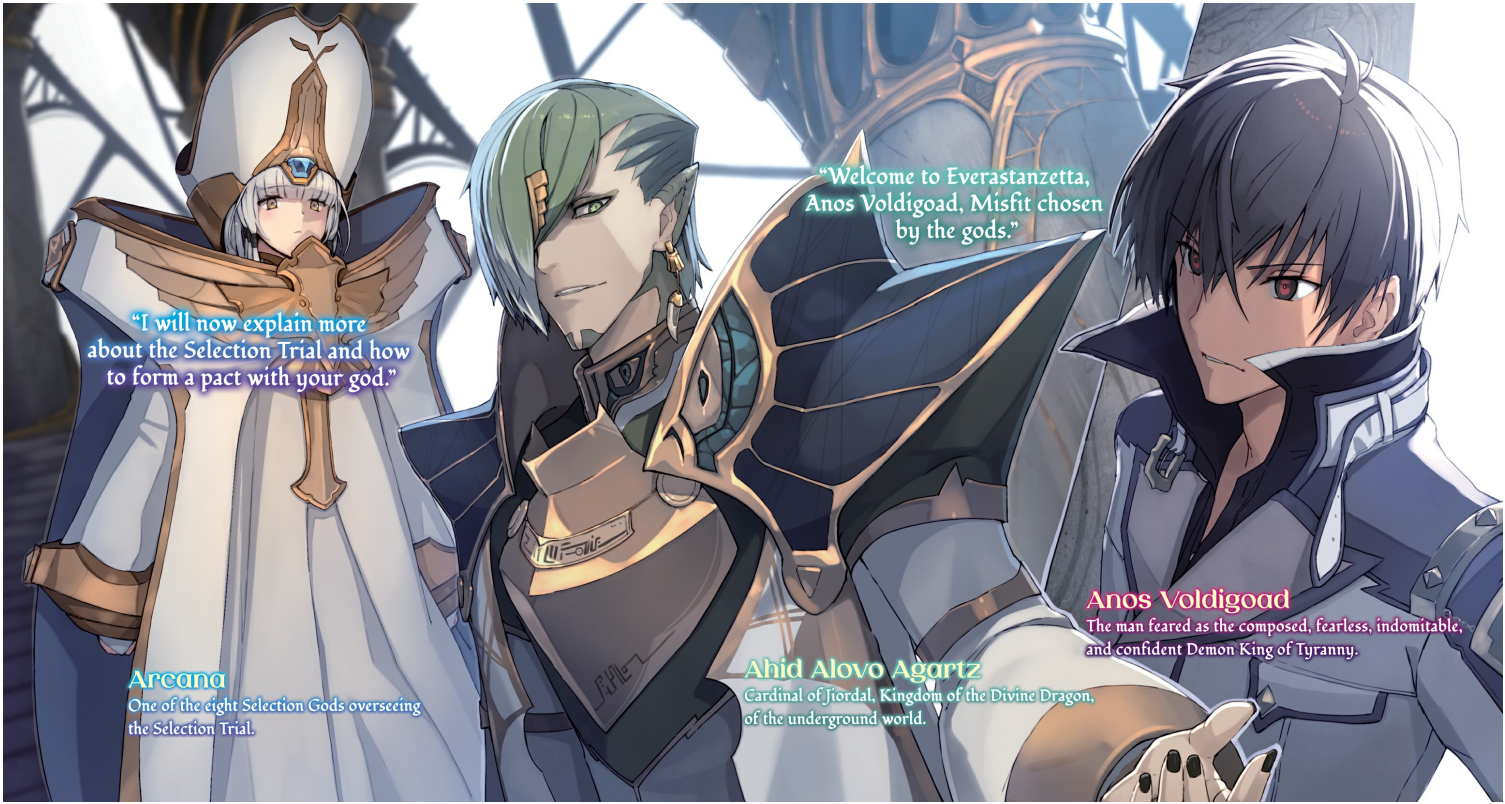
"Don't you think all our swimsuits are a little too daring?"

Zeshia Bianca
The youngest of the ten thousand Zeshias born from Eleonore.

"Counterattack time..."

"Whoa! Swimsuits!"

Eleonore Bianca
A motherly student of the Hero Academy and one of Anos's subordinates.



"I will now explain more about the Selection Trial and how to form a pact with your god."

Arcana

One of the eight Selection Gods overseeing the Selection Trial.

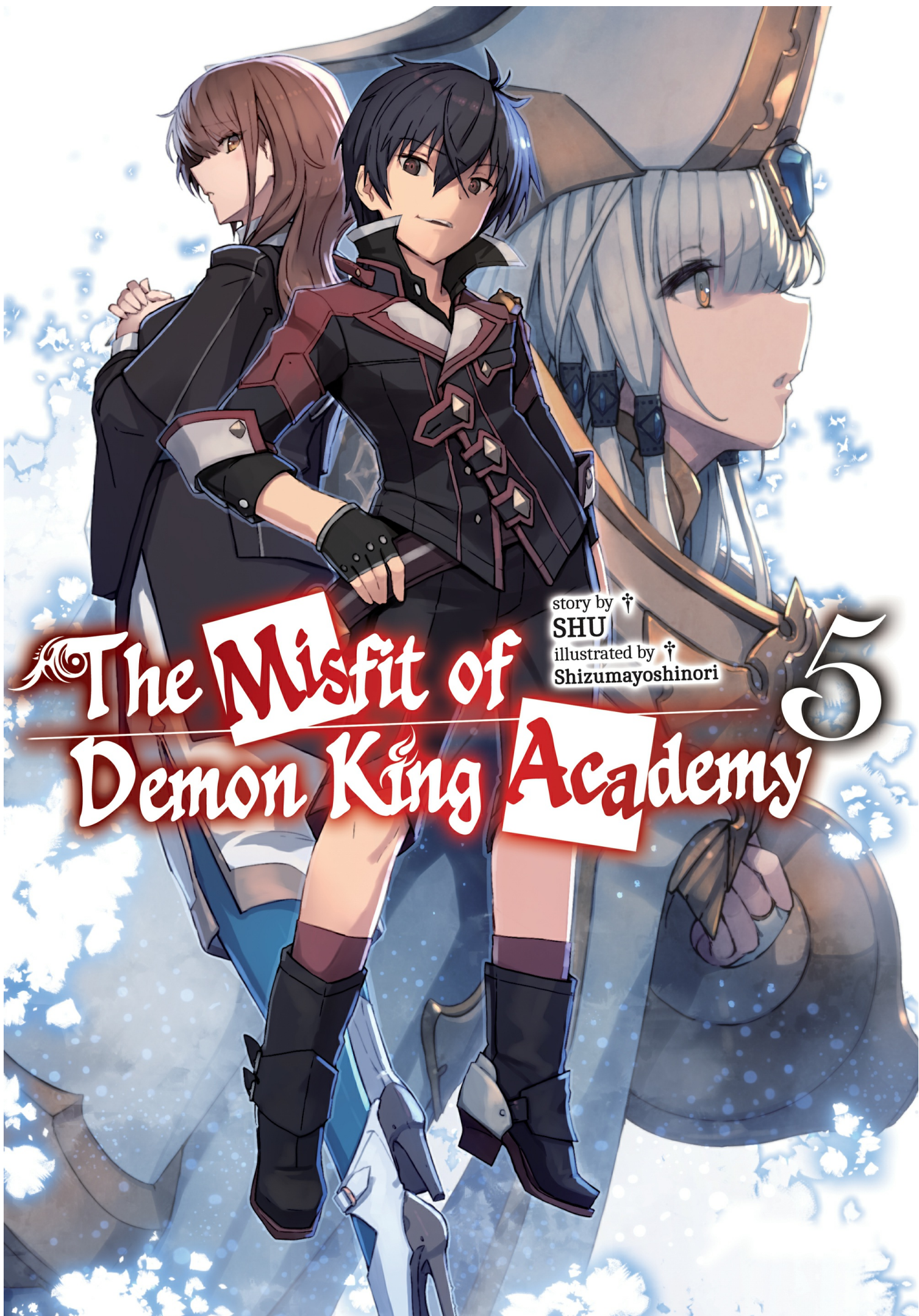
"Welcome to Everastanzetta, Anos Voldigoad, Misfit chosen by the gods."

Ahid Alover Agartz

Cardinal of Jiordal, Kingdom of the Divine Dragon, of the underground world.

Anos Voldigoad

The man feared as the composed, fearless, indomitable, and confident Demon King of Tyranny.



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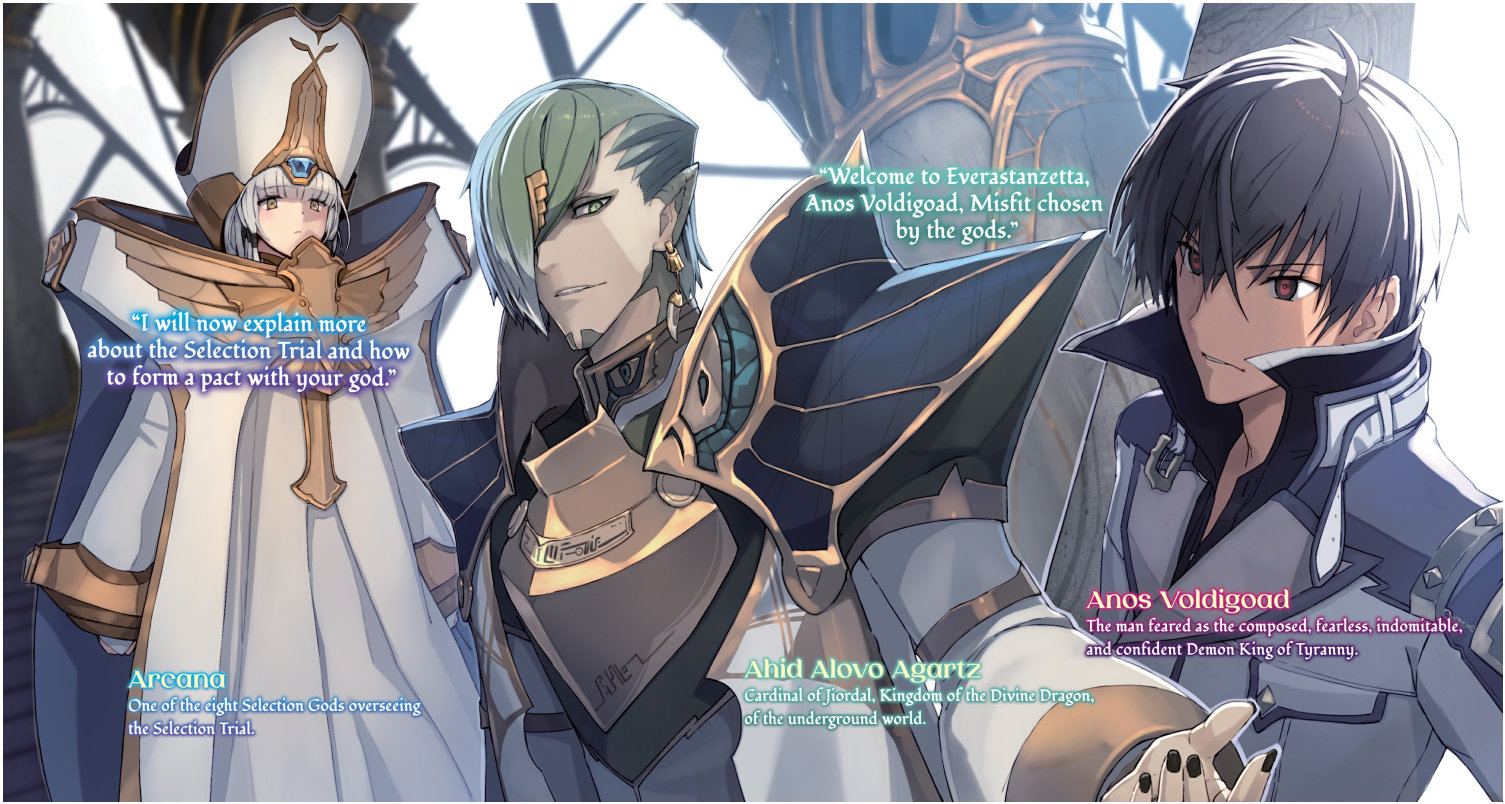
Misha's somewhat pushy but caring older twin sister.

Zeshia Bianca

The youngest of the ten thousand Zeshias born from Eleonore.

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A motherly student of the Hero Academy and one of Anos's subordinates.



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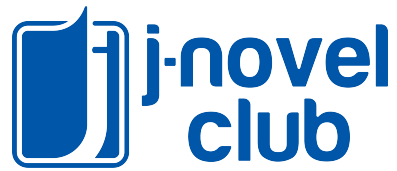
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The Misfit of Demon King Academy: Volume 5

by SHU

Translated by Mana Z.

Edited by Stephanie Buck

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